

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery MAGAZINE

MARCH 1999

## DOWN AND OUT STABLE

"It's crooked, Frenchy.  
I could lose my license."  
Still, owning part  
of a racehorse  
was tempting.  
"Tell you what..."

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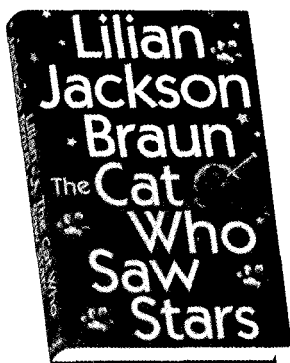
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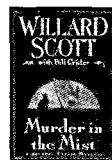
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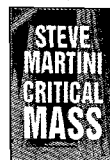
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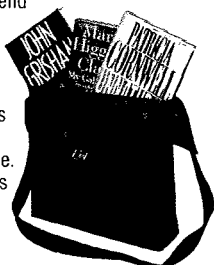
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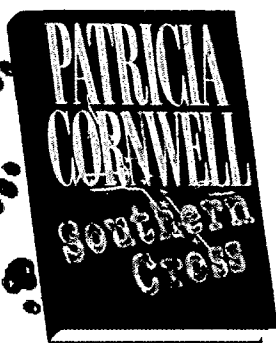
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

**A**s we hope you've noticed, we have a Web site—see the address at the bottom of this page—one we share with *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene*. And we are starting a new item thereon, a chance for readers to name the story they liked best in each issue. We invite everyone to participate.

Naturally, we think all the stories are terrific, but it's nice to be able to give special praise. So, if you're able to go online, check in when you've read an issue and let us know your favorite.

And we'll make sure the authors get the news.

In October we attended Bouchercon in Philadelphia, the annual convention of mystery fans, authors, editors, agents, and others. A couple of awards ceremonies take place there, one of them hosted by the Private Eye Writers of America. We were pleased that an

AHMM story, Gregory Fallis's "Lord of Obstacles," published in our January 1997 issue, was nominated for Best Private Eye Short Story of the year. It's a delightful and interesting story, and we had our fingers crossed. It didn't work, though; the Shamus went to Carolyn Wheat for "Love Me for My Yellow Hair Alone," published in the anthology *Marilyn: Shades of Blonde* (Forge).

Doug Allyn and John Lutz were also nominated for EQMM stories.

The other Shamus categories and winners were as follows:

Terrance Faherty's *Come Back Dead* (Simon & Schuster) for Best Private Eye Novel of 1997;

Rick Riordan's *Big Red Tequila* (Bantam) for Best Private Eye First Novel;

Laura Lippman's *Charm City* (Avon) for Best Private Eye Paperback Original Novel.

Congratulations to all!

---

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FICTION

# DOWN AND OUT STABLE

Dan A. Sproul



*Illustration by David Monette*

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**F**renchy Morin was a professional stooper. I doubt the word stooper is in the dictionary. But if it were, the definition would read "one who stoops for profit." I give this definition because few outside a certain segment of the population have ever encountered a professional stooper—only those frequenting thoroughbred racetracks across America with regularity can claim the distinction.

A stooper combs the racetrack in a bent-over position gathering discarded pari-mutuel tickets from the floors, the steps, and all other paved areas. The one burning objective of the stooper is to obtain uncashed winning tickets.

Frenchy had his own operating parameters. From the second though the fourth race he stood outside the entrance gate. He accosted anyone leaving the track before the fourth race and requested that they hand over their program and *Racing Form*. The patron usually gave it to him, since the items no longer held value. Frenchy would in turn offer the *Form* and program at a tremendous discount to the next passerby entering the track. From this activity he would acquire enough to buy his way in and perhaps enough to make a few small but prudent wagers.

After the fourth race Frenchy would begin his ceaseless scavenging, which lasted to the end of the day. He wore those fatigues with large pockets on each leg. Wrapping the stacks of tickets with rubber bands, he worked

quickly and efficiently, stuffing them into his deep pockets for examination later in the day. Surprisingly, he was able to eke out a living.

But it all ended about 1985 when the tracks began to get wise. It finally dawned on them that an uncashed ticket was pure profit. They hired an army of sweepers who moved constantly past every nook and cranny, sweeping up tickets and putting them in black trash bags. The bags were tied off and quickly taken from public view. The stoopers were out of business. Frenchy didn't have much choice. He got a job sweeping the floors at Calder and stuffed what tickets he could down a pair of sweatpants that tied at the ankles.

It's necessary that I tell you about Frenchy and the stooper business; otherwise, you wouldn't really be able to follow the gist of what I'm about to tell you. By the way, I'm Joe Standard. I run Standard Investigations, a one-man agency here in Miami. The whole thing started with Frenchy and his pants, more or less.

Calder is dark on Wednesdays—that means there is no racing that day. It was on a Wednesday that Frenchy came to my office. He plopped down on my cot under the enlarged, king-sized photograph of mighty Seattle Slew sailing majestically to the lead in the 1977 Preakness.

"I need your advice," Frenchy said. "I couldn't think of anybody else to talk to about this—nobody that I trust."

"What's on your mind, Frenchy?"

"You know my sister Bedilieah and me work at Calder?"

I nodded. "Yeah, so?"

"You know they're giving away a racehorse this weekend at Calder?"

What Frenchy was talking about was a promotion being run at Calder Race Course. It was to last for a week and end on Saturday with a drawing for a twenty-five thousand dollar claiming horse. Anybody paying admission could enter.

"I heard about it," I said.

Frenchy looked about suspiciously, then blurted it out. "I've got almost three thousand entry blanks for the drawing." When I didn't say anything, he kept on. "I can probably get another couple thousand before Saturday."

"Where did you get them?"

"I got them off the floor and out of the trash barrels—me and Bedilieah. Most people are tourists, they just throw 'em away."

"I don't follow," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

Frenchy has a tremendous overbite. Makes him sort of resemble a chipmunk. It was distracting to watch him talk, but he explained to me that track employees, the horsemen, and their families were not eligible to enter the drawing.

"That's why I came to you,"

Frenchy continued. "Me and Bedilieah want to put your name on all the entry slips we pick up. We can split the horse between us."

"I'm sorry, Frenchy, but it's crooked. I could lose my license if we got caught." Still, the thought

of owning part of a racehorse was pretty tempting. "Tell you what. I think Swine will do it. I'll talk him into it for a quarter of the horse."

Swine was Frankie Swinehart. Swine helped me out in the business from time to time. He bet the horses with both hands and would kill his brother or even bet on the dogs to get a piece of a thoroughbred. The trouble was, Swine was not fond of Bedilieah, Frenchy's sister—not since she'd dumped him for a Cuban trombone player.

As it turned out, Swine was quite enthusiastic about the deal, but there was a snag. Frenchy and Bedilieah didn't trust Swine. If he had his name on all the entries, what was to stop him from taking the horse and telling us to hit the bricks? Addressing this problem allowed Crook to wangle his way into the picture. Yes, that's right, his name is Ordway Crook. He was the only lawyer I had occasion to deal with on a professional basis. I always referred my clients who were pursuing a divorce action to Crook—for a percentage, naturally. In my opinion Crook could not have been more fittingly named. He was just what this organization needed: competent but not altogether ethical. In addition, he was a habitual horseplayer—he lived for the bet-three.

"Naturally I would expect a share in the ownership of the animal," Crook informed our small group. "I see no real difficulty here. We will simply enter into a partnership. Let's see, we should

have a name for the group to refer to in the instrument. Are there any suggestions?"

Swine spoke up: "I got an idea. How about 'Four Guys and a Two-Timing Bucktoothed Bitch with a Mustache.'"

Swine's suggestion didn't get many votes. We finally decided on Down and Out Stable, since we could all agree that none of us was exactly long in the wallet.

Crook pulled the proverbial yellow ruled pad from a drawer. He laid it carefully on his desk. "Now let's get all the data down correctly," he said. "First, I will need your proper names." He pointed his pencil at Frenchy. "What's your given name?"

"Guy," Frenchy replied.

"What the hell kind of name is that?" asked Swine.

"French-Canadian," Frenchy said defensively.

"How do you spell that?" Crook asked.

"G-u-y—but it's pronounced Gee."

"Is that short for geek?" Swine wanted to know, looking sideways at Bedilieah.

Swine and Frenchy were about the same height, but Swine outweighed him by thirty pounds and Swine was skinny. You can imagine how puny that made Frenchy. When Frenchy stood up and cocked his right hand, I got between them. I told Swine he was out of the syndicate if he caused any more trouble. It shut him up.

Up until now things had gone pretty straightforwardly, but at

this point they began to get a bit complicated.

Crook looked up from the scribbles on his ruled pad. "There, I think that's everything we need to ensure joint ownership." He turned to Frenchy. "How many entry slips do you estimate you will be able to acquire?"

"Around five thousand—there's tomorrow, and Friday should be a big day."

"And does anybody know how many slips are already deposited for the drawing—that is to say, how many legitimate entries there will be?"

Swine piped up. "They got boxes all over the place to put those slips in. I bet there's fifty thousand."

"That's crazy," I countered. "The normal paid attendance this time of year is only about five thousand a day, probably less on weekdays. Most of the handle is coming from off-track betting."

Frenchy held up his hand like he was still in school.

"What is it, Frenchy?" Crook asked.

"Ah . . . there is one other thing. Bedilieah and her girlfriend are in charge of collecting the slips from the entry boxes . . . You tell them, Bedilieah."

All eyes swung to Bedilieah except Swine's; he studied the ceiling.

"Me and my girlfriend Samantha dump the entry boxes into trash bags and take them to the big drum for the drawing." She looked down at the floor. "Some of those trash bags get mixed up with the trash."

"Now, that *is* illegal," Crook observed. But you could see the pleasure radiating outward through the fat folds flopping over his collar. "Up until now everything has been almost technically legal. That is to say, there was no limit set on the number of entries in the rules."

"You had to pay admission to get an entry slip," I pointed out.

Crook brushed it aside. "A mere technicality," he said. "More to the point, what did you promise your friend Samantha?" He directed his inquiry at Bedilieah.

"I promised her a fourth interest," said Bedilieah.

Crook shrugged his beefy shoulders. "Well, as you can see, that's out of the question now. However, what's her full name? I'll put her in the partnership for a . . . let's see." Crook's finger moved down the ruled sheet. His lips moved silently. "She will get a sixth."

"Just a minute," I broke in. "Aren't we jumping the gun here? What the hell we goin' to do with a racehorse if we do win it? None of us got any money to stable and race a horse." I looked directly at lawyer Crook. He nodded in agreement. Obviously he hadn't snagged a pick-three in some time.

"Joe has a point," Crook said. "Perhaps we could sell it."

"*We ain't selling it!*" It was a uniform chorus.

"You're right," Crook agreed. "It would be blasphemous. Who knows where ownership in a thoroughbred could lead?—think of the contacts one could make."

"When he wins, you get to go to the winner's circle and get your picture took," Frenchy contributed.

"You get an owner's box," said Bedilieah.

"You have to pay for an owner's box," I said. "But you get to park in the horsemen's parking lot."

"What the hell you guys talking about?" Swine said. "Owners get a permanent pass to the clubhouse."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

Crook broke in. "None of that matters. What matters is how do we get around the problem of training and racing the horse with no money?"

Swine came up with the obvious. "Let's get a trainer to throw in with us."

Everybody agreed, it was an excellent idea. I even thought so and volunteered to talk to old Oslo Corbett. I used to be an assistant trainer under Buddy Wayne years ago, and I kept my track license up. It allowed me access to the backstretch. When my caseload dwindled, I could usually hook up with somebody back there to pitch horse manure and muck stalls until things picked up in the private eye business.

It was decided that I would talk to Oslo and offer him a piece of the horse if he would agree to stable and train it. We set a meeting for Thursday afternoon in Crook's office after the last race, at which time I would give



my report and we could decide what to do next.

I caught up with old Oslo as he was coming off the track the next morning with a couple of two-year-olds. I call him old Oslo because he was on the wrong side of seventy and one of his favorite lines was "I been on this backstretch for fifty years, and it ain't never got no easier." He was also fond of the Woody Stevens line, "The harder we work, the luckier we get."

"Joe! What you doin' back here? You on a case, or are you broke again?"

Oslo, despite his age and the hardships he griped so incessantly about, was not without a certain wry humor.

"Neither, Oslo—I just miss the smell."

"Smart-ass, ain'tcha? Wouldn't be such a smart-ass, you had to get up at five every morning and do a day's work."

I was waiting for his fifty-years-in-the-backstretch spiel, but he surprised me. "You think you could go over to that stall and get that feed bucket hangin' on the wall in there?" He pointed to a gigantic black gelding, a good seventeen hands. The big horse looked meaner than hell. He swung his head to and fro, eyeballing the both of us. Then he snorted a couple of times and rolled his eyes.

"Why don't you get it?" I asked.

"He don't like me. Every time I reach in there, he tries to bite me."

"He'll bite me, too."

"I don't think he will," Oslo

said. "You didn't give him an enema with the extra big syringe a half hour ago."

I got the bucket for him. I then explained about Frenchy and the entry slips. And I brought him up to speed about Ordway Crook and the group.

Oslo's response was, "Sounds like you're all nuts to me. Ordway Crook is a crook. Charged me forty dollars once for writing a note demanding payment of the two hundred he imagined I owed him. All lawyers are crooks. That's why you see so many in public office."

"You going to do it or not? If you don't want in, let me know. I'll get somebody else."

"Didn't say I wouldn't do it—just said you were all nuts. . . . I guess I could train him for part ownership all right. How many owners are there?"

"You will be number seven."

Old Oslo scrunched up the wrinkles in his forehead and squinted at me. "You must think I'm some kind of dope. I get forty-five dollars a day for a horse in training or racing. I got to feed 'em and pay the grooms . . . exercise boys. A seventh ain't enough. He'd have to win most of his starts for me to come out."

"What if I got Sid up in Dania at Luther's Feed & Supply to cover the feed and hay?"

Oslo cupped his chin in his hand. "And the bedding straw?"

"Yeah."

"I guess I could live with that." Oslo said. "But what about the farrier and the vet? I don't think

you realize what it costs to own and race a thoroughbred. This is a rich man's game."

I had to admit we had not thought that far ahead. But it had gone too far to turn back at this juncture. "Okay, why can't we give a piece of the horse to the vet and the horseshoer and anybody else you normally use? Could you arrange something like that?"

"Hmm . . . goin' to be more fingers in the pie. Might work, though."

"I'll take care of the feed and hay," I reminded him. "Anybody else you sign on, be sure to call up Crook and give him the name so he can put him into the syndicate."

"Syndicate . . . that's a laugh," Oslo mumbled to himself; "... boy's got too much time on his hands." Then he called after me. "Okay, but I ain't payin' that two hundred to Crook, 'cause I don't owe him nothin'."

When I got to Dania, it took only five minutes to talk Sid into the deal. When he asked how many were in on the horse, I just told him he was number eight.

I was a little late getting back. When I got to the meeting in Crook's office, Frenchy and Swine were busy filling out entry forms. Bedilieah was counting and stacking the slips into piles. They worked out of an extra large trash bag fat with entry blanks. Heel marks and mustard stains were evident on many.

"Okay, he's here," Crook said. "We can get started."

Swine stopped writing and massaged his writing hand. "I think I got writer's cramp," he said. "I wonder how many we got done?" It was obvious he did not want to address Bedilieah directly. She answered anyway.

"Just under eight hundred."

"We ain't ever goin' to get these done in time," Swine said.

Something occurred to me. I decided to toss it in. "Isn't it going to look a bit peculiar if five thousand entries end up with Swine's name on them? I mean, somebody might look at the damn things before the drawing."

"Yes, I agree," said Crook. "It would look rather suspicious. I suppose I could fill out a few . . . Let us put that aside for the moment. Were you able to enlist the aid of the deadbeat Corbett?"

I filled in the group concerning my conversation with old Oslo, and added, "My guess is we'll end up with ten or eleven owners before it's over with."

Swine spoke up, still rubbing his hand. "I don't know about anybody else, but I can't write no more of these for awhile. Name and address is bad enough, but they want the phone number, too."

"How long have you been working on them?" I asked.

"Off and on since last night," Swine said.

I looked at Frenchy and Bedilieah. "How about you two?"

"Coupla hours last night," said Frenchy. "About a half hour waiting for you to show—same for Bedilieah."

"You and Bedilieah still have tomorrow to collect entries, so we don't even have them all yet. It appears like we won't have time to fill them all out—not unless we all work on them. What about the legit entries filled out Saturday before the drawing?"

Ordway Crook smiled. "We have already discussed that issue—those entries will never reach the big drawing barrel."

"I've got an idea," I said. "How about this. Put the blanks in stacks of five hundred or so. Frenchy, whatever you collect tomorrow, me and Ordway will fill out. All these we got left in the bag—bundle them up in packets, and I'll take them up to Sid and over to Oslo for him to pass out tomorrow morning. We can collect them all Friday night and put them in the barrel Saturday before the drawing."

"How we goin' to get them in the barrel?" Frenchy asked.

"Me and Samantha can do that." Bedilieah volunteered. "Instead of the bag with Saturday's entries, we just substitute ours."

"That's good," I said. "But how do we get them into the track? Look kind of funny if you're carrying a trash bag *in*, wouldn't it?"

It was discussed at length. Finally Frenchy determined that if both he and Bedilieah wore sweatpants and the tickets were bound by rubber bands and Ordway, Swine, and myself each loaded our pockets and the inside of our shirts, we might be able to pull it off. The eight hundred or so entries filled out with Swine's name

and any more we completed tonight could go into the entry barrel tomorrow in place of Friday's legit entries. We all sat down and began to write.

I didn't have the least doubt that this whole enterprise was doomed from the get-go. There were so many gotchas built in—so many things could go bad. The single hope I could see for us was the motivation within the racing community that was stronger than love, hate, or greed: ownership of a racing thoroughbred.

Before the meeting broke up that evening, Crook passed out to us a partnership agreement in Down and Out Stable and gave an extra one to Bedilieah for her friend Samantha. After we had all signed, he handed the balance of the sheets to me.

"Anybody who fills out any of the entry slips must fill out this partnership agreement. Be sure Oslo the deadbeat understands that—and be sure you get that racketeer at the feed store to sign one when you go there with the slips. If we don't have a signed partnership agreement, their entries won't go in the barrel."

I was glad to call it a night. My head was beginning to ache worse than my hand.

Early the next morning I trooped over to the Calder backstretch to find old Oslo. One would think, on the face of it, that horse trainers have a pretty good life—after all, the horses do most of the hard work. But horses are hungry or sick or need attention seven days a week including holidays. A

good trainer is there early, and he stays late. Actually, it's a pretty rough deal for a guy like Oslo with only a small string of mostly cripples. He couldn't afford a lot of help. I caught him mucking out a stall.

"Damn kid up and quit on me," he said.

He asked me to help him out. There was another stall to prepare for a horse out on the training track with the exercise rider and the morning ration of feed and hay to distribute. The horses were kicking and snorting all up and down the line in anticipation. Then there was a three-year-old that needed to get out on the track with the starters for gate training. He was due to get his gate pass today. Old Oslo got a solid three hours out of me before I was able to get him off to the side.

I explained to him what was discussed at the meeting the night before: that we didn't have the people to fill out the slips in time for the drawing Saturday, and that we wanted a little diversity in the names. I showed Oslo the shopping bag I carried.

"There's five packets of entry slips—about five hundred to a bundle," I explained. "You need to fill out one packet and get the others you've recruited to fill out the rest."

I handed him the partnership sheets Crook had prepared and explained how that worked. He filled one out while I waited.

"Wait a minute," Oslo said. "I thought people who work at the

track and the horsemen weren't eligible to win. Should I be fillin' these out?"

"Damn! That's right. Okay . . . so have somebody you trust fill out your entries. Nobody in your immediate family, though."

"I thought you said that everybody who filled in the entry slips had to sign the agreement to become a partner," Oslo said. "Does that mean my son-in-law is going to be a partner, too?"

I knew this was going to get too damn complicated.

I told Oslo to do whatever he had to, just so the entries were filled out by the time I came back for them later that night. I had one bundle left for Sid, which I dropped off along with the partnership papers. It took Sid, me, and three of his employees almost three hours to fill out the five hundred or so entry slips with Sid's name. I fired up my Mustang and headed back to Miami with Sid's partnership agreement and the completed entries. It was still early. I stopped to grab a hamburger and made it to Calder just after the second race.

I found Frenchy on the second level grandstand.

"How's it going, Frenchy?"

He handed me a sheaf of entries wrapped with a rubber band. "Here, take these. Maybe you can get an early start filling them out. If you can find Bedilieah, she has some more."

I nodded my understanding and walked over to the clubhouse exchange, spent a dollar, and rode the escalator to the third level of



the clubhouse. I found Bedlieah. She turned over two loose hand-fuls and told me that Samantha had more. I jammed what she gave me into my pockets and headed for an exit. Whatever Samantha had we could finish up tonight.

I took the steps leading down to ground level in the clubhouse and went out the east exit, which leads to the walkway from the paddock to the track. The contenders for the third race were just coming from the saddling area to the paddock. I spotted old Oslo tightening the cinch on the big ornery black gelding. The horse appeared not to have totally forgiven Oslo for his indiscretion. He whipped around at him several times with bared teeth—checking out what he was up to.

I didn't know the distance of the race, didn't know the odds, didn't know the gelding's record—but I was certain of a couple of things: his number was two, and he didn't take a lot of crap. I went back into the clubhouse and plunked down my next to last twenty on him.

The break was clean. Number four, a small chestnut with white stockings, streaked to the front. At the three-eighths turn the big black gelding ranged up to the chestnut's inside flank, hugging the rail. At the half mile they were neck and neck.

**"OUT TO LUNCH ON THE OUTSIDE—COUNT CECIL ON THE RAIL, NECK AND NECK—THIS IS A HORSERACE, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"**

I wondered what idiot had named that fine animal Cecil. No wonder he was upset all the time.

As they turned into the stretch Out to Lunch lugged in severely. The black had to check but then came on again, now from the outside. As he drew alongside, he stretched his big black neck over and bit the opposing jockey in the leg, then drew off to win by an easy length. Never saw that before. I waited for an objection from the jock, but none came. Maybe biting the jockey wasn't covered in the Rules of Racing; more likely, it was because he caused Cecil to check and would have been put back anyway. When it was official, I allowed my eyes to drift toward the toteboard. Cecil was twelve to one. My first winner in three weeks and I never even looked at a program—so much for handicapping. Maybe all this would work out after all.

Me and Ordway spent the afternoon filling out entry slips. Crook's secretary was his niece—his sister's daughter. He didn't want to get her involved, so we toiled together in silence for an agonizing four hours. Just before dark I left to hunt down old Oslo in the Calder backstretch to retrieve the entries I'd given him. I found him applying a poultice to Count Cecil's front leg.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

Olso jumped. "Oh, Joe. You startled me." He finished the wrap he was making and released the leg. "That leg always warms up a bit after he runs a big one. Did you see the old boy run?"

"See him run . . . I guess so. I won two hundred sixty bucks."

Oslo stood up and patted the gelding's neck. "He just turned ten. Don't know how many more he's got in him," he said, wiping poultice off on his pants. He came out and fastened the stall barrier behind him. "I got the stuff over here."

I followed along behind him. "What happens when he can't race no more?" I asked.

"Don't know. Retired him once. Tried to use him as a lead pony. Didn't work out. When they broke from the gate, he pitched the lead girl on her butt—took off after the pack. I talked to the people who bred him. They might turn him out when he's finished. He was a pretty good miler when he was younger. Won almost three hundred thousand on the track."

"I notice he isn't trying to bite you any more."

Oslo picked up the shopping bag. "He's smart enough to know a poultice from an enema. More'n I can say for some people." He pulled the partnership agreements from the bag. "Used these all up . . . But we got the entries filled out." He put the partnership agreements back in the bag with the entry slips and put the bag in my hand. "Let me know how it works out," he said and went into the old gelding's stall with his tray of iodine scrub, ointments, and leg wraps. The big black didn't try to bite him.

I got all the way to Crook's office before I remembered that the carrot I'd gotten for Cecil was

still on the front seat of my Mustang.

Ordway, Bedilieah, Swine, and Frenchy were finishing the remaining entries. A pudgy, black-haired, dark-skinned young girl who could only be Samantha sat across the table from Swine. She also worked at filling in entries.

"Can I have some of that carrot?" Swine asked.

I had brought Cecil's carrot in with me. I was going to eat it myself but pictured the act in my mind and thought better of it. "Knock yourself out," I said, handing it to him.

"Samantha, you want half?" Swine asked. Drawing a smile from Samantha and a malevolent glare from Bedilieah.

I guess nobody found it bizarre that I was walking around with a carrot. I put the shopping bag on the table and pulled out the partnership agreements. I banged the papers—side, then end—on the table. Once they were even on all sides, I handed the pile to Crook.

"Jeeesus! . . . How many are there?" Crook asked.

"I didn't bother to count. But anybody who was connected to the racetrack had to have somebody else's name on the entry. That means we not only got the track vet, we also got his sister's ex-husband. That's because his sister took her own name back and the vet didn't have any other relatives in town. It's a mess." Crook put Oslo's collective agreements with those he already had, then began to sort through them. After a bit he spoke up.

"Not so bad, only fifteen total."

The big day came. We got the entries past the main gate without a problem. We found Bedilieah on the third level grandstand waiting for us.

It was early. The crowd was sparse. She produced a black garbage bag. Off in the corner, while the others of us blocked the view, one by one we stripped the entries we carried of their rubber bands and dumped them into the bag. Bedilieah produced a green tie strip, tied off the bag, and dragged it away. There was nothing left now but to wait for the drawing.

Swine, Ordway Crook, and myself found seats in the grandstand to await the drawing, seven races and about six hours away. We hadn't been there long when Sid Perdue, ex-bookmaker and owner of Luther's Feed & Supply, urged his girth up the steps to our seats and plopped down next to Ordway Crook.

"I see they ain't run you out of town yet," he said to Crook.

"I could say the same for you," Crook responded.

That these two were acquainted through some past dealing there could be little doubt.

Sid leaned out to address me from the other end of the row. "What's the shyster doin' here?" he asked. I explained Crook's involvement, and we sat back to wait.

Swine lost every dime he had before the fourth race. Shortly after that I spotted old Oslo Corbett coming down the aisle steps

two rows over. He saw the group and headed our way. Two old ladies next to me graciously moved down a seat, and Oslo, after locking stares with Crook for an instant, sat down. Oslo leaned over and whispered, "What's the shyster doin' here?"

Old habits die hard. Sid booked a twenty dollar bet for Swine in the fifth. We watched Swine's selection pitch the jockey off at the start, then jump both the inner and outer turf rails. Outfoxing the outriders temporarily, he settled down to chomp on some infield grass and take a drink out of the infield lake. "I'll pay you Friday," Swine grumbled.

"Credit's good; you want to go again?" Sid, naturally, was aware that Swine was a certified anchor—and was not ever going to win a horse bet of any real substance.

"You know it's illegal to book bets at the racetrack," Crook pointed out for our edification, smarting over the fact that he also had Swine's horse in the third leg of his live bet-three, which was now in the toilet. "In fact, unless you have state licensing . . ."

Oslo cut him off mid-sentence. "Stuff it, Crook—you windbag. It's just a bet among friends."

"I don't listen to legal opinions from deadbeats," Crook said.

Old Oslo got to his feet. "I'll deadbeat your face!"

"Yeah, and I'll help him," Sid contributed, standing up.

I got them quieted down before the sixth. There is no true horseplayer, living or dead, with two dollars in his pocket who can sit

through seven races without making a bet. In fact, you probably couldn't find any who would sit betless through more than two races. I was no exception. The anxiety and tension were so intense it seemed you could grab a handful out of the air. Betting was at least a distraction. I bet a twenty dollar exacta box in the sixth and dropped forty dollars.

"Boy, are you a sap," Swine commented. An observation I really needed from the horseracing king of dumbbells. "That four horse had front leg wraps, I told you."

"At least they finished the race and aren't out takin' a crap in the infield."

Somehow we got to the seventh race. Bedilieah, Samantha, and Frenchy drifted down to take seats behind our row. Each still held a broom.

I bet twenty on a nine-to-five buzzsaw sprinter that got knocked sideways out of the gate and ran third. I cussed and dashed my ticket to the floor. Swine was wordlessly enjoying my misfortune, or so it seemed to me.

"Don't smirk at me, you little turd," I said to him. "I'll smack you."

"What! Didn't say nothin'," Swine replied in self-defense.

"Hold on!" said Frenchy. "They're wheeling the big drum into the winner's circle for the drawing!"

"Just remember," Crook reminded the group, "there are at least a coupla thousand entries that could beat us."

"Yeah, but we got five thousand," I pointed out, pouncing on

his negativity. "That's five to two—I'll take those odds anytime."

"Me too," came the chorus, not realizing they had little choice.

The first drawing was a trip for two to the Bahamas. John Seymour, the track vet's sister's ex-husband, was the winner.

Then the fellow who was selected from the audience to draw the slips drew the big one: the winner of the racing thoroughbred. He handed it to the announcer. We all leaned forward.

**"ALL RIGHT . . . LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! HERE IS THE WINNER OF THE TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLAR RACING THOROUGHBRED ALONG WITH ONE WEEK'S FREE TRAINING OR A BUY-BACK OFFER FROM THE OWNER FOR THE SUM OF TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS! ARE YOU READY?"**

"Read the damn thing," I heard myself say.

**"AND THE WINNER IS—MARION SCHWARZ, 12597 OXIAN WAY IN KENDALL. CONGRATULATIONS, MARION . . . IS MARION SCHWARZ IN THE AUDIENCE?"**

Every head in the group swung to Ordway Crook. Crook sat frozen for an instant, then began to riffle through the partnership agreements frantically.

"Yes!" he shouted. "Here it is, Marion Schwarz!"

"My exercise girl's grandmother," Old Oslo informed the bunch.

Screams, squeals, and general commotion broke out. Samantha hugged Bedilieah—Bedilieah



hugged Swine—Crook hugged Sid—Swine hugged me—and I hugged Oslo against his will.

The horse's name was Sailor's Dream. Sailor won his first time out for us. After the jockey got his ten percent and old Oslo got his ten percent, there was still twelve thousand eight hundred to split among the owners—that was over eight hundred for each of us. When we had the meeting in Crook's office to divvy it up, a strange thing happened. The horseshoer made a motion that we leave the money with the horsemen's book-

keeper and see if Oslo could claim the group another horse. Eighty-year-old Marion Schwarz seconded the motion along with Sid Purdue. It passed without objection—unanimously. We have six horses in the stable now, and old Oslo finally hired an assistant.

Now you know about Down and Out Stable. So if you happen to find yourself at a South Florida racetrack anytime soon, and you see the name Down and Out Stable on the program, get your money down, 'cause we only run 'em fit and where they can win.

FICTION



**KIET:  
ONE DAY IN  
THE LIFE OF  
Gary Alexander**

*Illustration by Linda Weatherly*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/99*

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6:38 A.M. *BOMB*

"Superintendent, they've blown up the Mad Cow!"

Bamsan Kiet, Superintendent of Police of Hickorn, capital of the Kingdom of Luong, stood numbly in his doorway and absorbed Captain Binh's frantic statement with a yawn. "The statue at the stock exchange?"

"Yep. Blew it to smithereens."

Kiet did not pursue the location of Smithereens or why the bomber or bombers engineered a directional explosion. One thing at a time. "They?"

"We don't know yet. Happened less than forty-five minutes ago. I'm guessing commies making some kind of dorky anticapitalism statement."

Toward the end of the Cold War, Captain Binh, Kiet's adjutant and second in command, had studied modern police methodology for a year in the United States of America, at their District of Columbia constabulary. A taste for Red-baiting acquired from conservative colleagues had not waned with the demise of communism. He also brought home a wealth of useless technological know-how and western slang.

"Captain, there is no active communist movement in Luong."

"Yeah, well, don't forget, the Viet who runs HSE was once upon a time a VC fanatic."

True, Kiet thought. Bong Van Dong, an insanely heroic Vietcong sapper during the American War, was director of the Hickorn Stock Exchange. That he also ran a securities brokerage might have been construed as a conflict of interest if this were not Luong, where "conflict of interest" was deemed a peculiarly Occidental notion.

"Yes, but why would he launch a guerrilla attack against himself?"

"We don't know what makes these comrades tick, superintendent, but we're sure as hell gonna have a chat with him."

Kiet backpedaled and slumped heavily onto his sofa. A meaty widower in his fifties wearing shorts, sandals, and undershirt, he was only slightly less disheveled than he was in normal business attire of slacks and white shirt.

Binh, in vivid contrast, half his age and as thin as a red herring, wore as always a spotless white uniform. His patent leather belt and boots were as highly polished as the golden captain's pips on his shoulder boards.

At this obscene hour Kiet's young adjutant was blinding. Kiet closed his eyes and said, "Witnesses?"

"Not really. Just some drunks sleeping it off down the street. Thought it was the end of the world but didn't see anybody."

"Vandalism perhaps," Kiet said. "Mischief."

"Well, if you wanna take the Pollyanna approach, superintendent,

and blame it on some street skell, okay, fine, but we really oughta saddle up and get down there while the clues are still fresh."

Clues, Kiet thought sourly. Since the Kingdom of Luong was imaginary, tangible clues would be difficult to come by. And despite Bamsan Kiet's being as ethereal as his setting, he groaned and rose to his feet, less than eager to begin his day.

#### 7:21 A.M. *PLASTIC TIME BOMB*

Transportation was a black Chevrolet Corvette, a terrifying assemblage of fiberglass and horsepower. No sooner had Captain Binh settled behind the wheel than his cellular telephone beeped. Along with the Corvette and a pager, Binh had confiscated the phone from an opium smuggler. He was nearly as enthusiastic about the electronic gizmos as he was about the automobile and wore them clipped to his belt like sidearms. It seemed to Kiet that his waistline constantly chirped.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh," Binh said, nodding as he revved the engine. "Uh-huh, uh-huh."

Kiet consoled himself; at least they were stationary. Binh was given to speaking into the device as he hurtled through Hickorn's narrow streets at perilous speeds. He had more than once advised Kiet to unwhiten his knuckles and "chill out," that American yuppies "telecommunicated" solely in that fashion.

Binh holstered his telephone and said, "Superintendent, you ain't gonna believe this."

Kiet suppressed a groan. "I would believe anything."

"Some merc, drunker'n a skunk in a Jeep, in an attempt to evade a uniform on scooter, smashed into the Prince Savhana statue."

The statue of the immortal Savhana was a pigeon-defiled bronze atop a stone pedestal. It commemorated the Prince leading Luong to its last military victory twenty-two centuries ago. "A stout obstacle. What, please, is a merc?"

"Merc. Mercenary soldier. Soldier of fortune. A real hard-ass by the name of Gunther Drago. I've heard of him. He tells wild tales at the watering holes he hangs out at. He's really been around. He's kept his nose clean in Hickorn until now. We've got him in custody." Binh glanced at his watch. "Ripped at seven in the morning. The guy's got serious problems. I wonder if it's a coincidence that he was in the vicinity when the Mad Cow was blown to kingdom come."

Binh lurched into traffic, belching a roostertail of blue smoke. Sitting virtually on the ground in a tattered bucket seat, Kiet could barely see the oxidized hood through the cracked windshield. Binh himself conceded that the "Vette" was not "cherry," but besides a Willys-Overland paddy wagon, the Corvette was at present the Hickorn Police Department's only four-wheeled vehicle. Kiet feared that if he could

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not soon contrive a means to separate Binh from the plastic deathtrap he risked joining his ancestors prematurely.

7:49 A.M. *BETTER RED THAN DEAD*

Even old Asia hands could be forgiven for unfamiliarity with Luong, former French colony and the Fourth Indochina. Thanks largely to the neutralist policy of its ruler, Prince Novisad Pakse, the kingdom avoided the bloody turmoil suffered by neighboring Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Now in his eighties, the crafty Pakse compensated for his nonexistent military might by naming and renaming Hickorn's downtown streets after foreign potentates who stood to do Luong harm or good.

These pats on the back and pokes in the eye kept interlopers off balance, their imperial ambitions at bay. Nor did it hurt that landlocked, pre-industrial Luong held utterly no economic or strategic allure to anyone.

One such thoroughfare was the freshly redesignated Avenue Alan Greenspan. It ran east to west, from leafy suburbs to the docks alongside the sluggish and toxic Ma San River. The three blocks nearest the water were lined with moneychangers, grain speculators, and pawnshops. As Hickorn's de facto financial district, Avenue Greenspan's previous tag, Rue Kim Il-Sung, seemed highly inappropriate.

The Hickorn Stock Exchange occupied a refurbished rice warehouse at the foot of Greenspan and Ma San Boulevard. A sculpture of the exchange's symbol, the water buffalo, had been erected in the corner plaza. Due to the vagaries and chaos of HSE trading, it was widely known as the Mad Cow.

Kiet and Binh parked and worked their way through a crowd of onlookers to the monument's wreckage: four gray hooves set between bricks. Kiet observed that many windows in surrounding buildings were broken.

Binh picked up a chunk of concrete and said, "They poured the Mad Cow on site in a mold, superintendent. They did it on the cheap, using the same substandard cement the government uses in public projects. That's why it crumbled and flew like shrapnel. Lucky nobody was hurt. Yo, there's Comrade Dong."

Kiet had never met Bong Van Dong but recognized him from newspaper photographs. Short and pudgy with wispy gray hair, the HSE director was gesturing to uniformed officers, talking fast and loudly.

Kiet introduced himself, and Dong abruptly demanded, "Have you caught the bombers yet? Your cops on the scene are not very efficient."

An HPD officer shrugged helplessly and said, "We have no eyewitnesses, superintendent. Has anybody called in taking credit?"

Kiet looked at his telephone- and pager-equipped adjutant, who shook his head.

“Who, please, has a grievance against you and the stock exchange?”

Dong made a sine curve with his hand. “The market fluctuates. For every happy seller there is an unhappy buyer and vice versa. The biggest complainers are deadbeat clients who buy on margin and cannot pay the remainder of the purchase price when their stock drops.”

Binh smirked. “Luongan stocks in particular, I hear, are in a permanent bear market mode. They basically stink. You mean to say you have no enemies? Past or present?”

“My past is irrelevant to my present and vice versa,” he said coolly. “This is the act of thrill-seekers. Do your job, and find and punish them.”

### 8:11 A.M. *GHOSTS*

“Superintendent, do you think Dong’s hiding something?”

“Captain, both hands on the steering wheel, please,” Kiet said as Binh slalomed the Corvette between an ox-driven charcoal cart and a pedal-driven wagon laden with papayas. He was reminded of his nation’s rudimentary manufacturing base. “Although the bombing has the earmarks of a prank, he was somewhat defensive.”

“Damn right he was! Think his past’s catching up to him?”

Bong Van Dong was reputed to have been a ferocious Vietcong guerrilla whose suicidal exploits on the streets of Saigon never quite succeeded. Satchel charges flung into GI bars fizzled out. Torrents of bullets discharged in gun battles with the city police and the South Vietnamese army zinged astray.

Dong survived the war despite his best intentions, fled Vietnam after a falling out with its new Hanoi masters, and settled in Hickorn where he attended bookkeeping school. Two years ago he sold his accountant firm to become cofounder and managing director of Luong’s first and only stock exchange.

“Captain, that war has been over for a quarter of a century.”

“A dyed-in-the-wool comrade never forgets. Somebody’s maybe royally pissed that Dong sold out and is up to his eyeballs in filthy lucre.”

“A contemporary enemy? I am not a financial person. What do you know of the Hickorn Stock Exchange? This is the first complaint that has taken us there.”

“Well, HSE ain’t exactly the NYSE, and Luong’s financial base is not what you’d call bridging into the twenty-first century, so most of the listings are like cigarettes and alcohol and light industry such as furniture and building materials, plus you’ve got retailers and wholesalers going public, which you’ve gotta figure a good fifty percent of their IPO’s are flimflam strictly to get their cash-flow situation out of the toilet. In essence, on a micro scale, you’re talking smoke-filled rooms and arbitrageurs when they get caught doing time in slammer where they can play tennis, those same kind of jerkoffs, and paper



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profit and loss and a healthy dose of bat guano and the little guy sucking hind titty, same-same as on the floor in New York and London and Tokyo, and the rub lately is that with softness in Asian currencies, the Luongan zin being as soft as a baby's behind, well, anybody who's heavily leveraged in domestic stocks is taking a bloody whipping."

Binh and his rapid-fire, indecipherable slang. "Thank you for illuminating the subject, captain. Am I correct in assuming that Director Dong's potential enemies are nearly infinite?"

Binh crossed Avenue Alexandre Loubet in front of a swarm of bicycles, pedicabs, buses, and taxis. Disappointed that his communist conspiracy theory was thin, he sighed and said, "Yeah, I guess. In that regard, you gotta like Gunther Drago for this, too."

The plastic sports car bounded and clattered along the pocked lot and skidded to a dusty halt at the superintendent's slot, a space Kiet would be happy to leave vacant into perpetuity.

Hickory Police Department headquarters was located at 900 Avenue Loubet, an artery honoring the nineteenth century French priest who had romanized the Luongan language for the benefit of the natives, to enable them to learn the Holy Bible with a civilized alphabet. The Chineselike ideograms of Old Luongan were incomprehensible to the missionaries and thus pagan.

Two stories of ugly tan stucco, it had served for fifty years as barracks and command center for French Legionnaires. After Luong's independence in 1954, the present tenants inherited the building, a saunalike acoustical horror.

When Bamsan Kiet became superintendent, he was careful to maintain the ambience. Bare sixty-watt bulbs cast streaky yellowish light on walls that smelled of sweat and adrenaline. Footfalls echoed on the tile floors like the marching jackboots of an out-of-step regiment. To visitors, especially those of the criminal persuasion, there was a sense of ghostly madness.

The new HPD guest awaiting Kiet and Binh in a holding tank appeared unintimidated by his surroundings. Nevertheless, the large florid white man appeared to be in some distress. He winced when Binh slammed the cell door harder than necessary.

"Gunther Drago, is it?" Binh said cheerfully as he scanned booking paperwork on a clipboard. "How's your head?"

Drago's gut strained against his jungle fatigue jacket. He had a full beard and a bush hat wadded in one hand. He growled, "It's been better."

"Officers reported that you were driving erratically on Ma San Boulevard and bugged out when they signaled you to pull over," Binh said.

The mercenary soldier grunted. "Had things to do, people to see."

"I'll bet you do. Scuttlebutt has it you saw action in the Congo and a half dozen other hotspots."

Drago lifted a shoulder and muttered in a vaguely British accent. "When there's a fire to put out, they know who to call."

"Commendable," Kiet said, unsealing a manila envelope. Along with the paperwork they had brought in Gunther Drago's personal effects.

"Since you're violating my privacy, gimme a cigarette outa there."

"This is a nonsmoking holding cell, bozo," Binh said. "What brings you to Luong?"

"Passing through."

"How long have you been passing through? You've been holding court at the expat bars like the Conti every night for weeks. Buying drinks so fellow pub crawlers will listen to your yarns."

Drago lifted the other shoulder. "There a law against it?"

"There is an ordinance prohibiting detonation of an explosive device inside the city limits," Kiet said.

Drago sneered. "Haven't the foggiest what you're babbling about, mate."

"You better cut the crapola, Drago," Binh bluffed. "Witnesses placed you in the vicinity of the Hickory Stock Exchange, taping C-4 to the privates of the Mad Cow. Who's paying you?"

Drago yawned. "Why would I pull a dumb stunt like that?"

Binh yawned. "This ain't Elm City, U.S.A., where you're innocent till proven guilty, bubba. You gotta show us that you didn't."

Kiet yawned as he searched Drago's wallet.

Drago grabbed for it. "Hey, if you want something, pally, ask."

Binh slapped Drago's hand away as Kiet dug into a secret compartment and withdrew a plastic-embossed card lettered in English. He gave it to Binh for scrutiny.

"A State of Indiana driver's license. Check out the mug shot, superintendent."

Kiet studied the photograph of a male in his twenties, a double-chinned Caucasian with a bovine expression. It was Gunther Drago sans facial hair.

"All DMV's use funhouse cameras," Binh added inscrutably.

"Please explain," Kiet said to Drago. "The name of the bearer is Eugene Dove."

"No comment, mate."

"Dove," Binh said, snapping his fingers. "Name's familiar. Not Eugene, but something almost like—Eunice. Yeah, Eunice Dove."

"Who?" Kiet asked.

"She has a cooking show on TV, superintendent. Everybody has a cooking show these days. It's a growth industry in the States. Eunice Dove's has top ratings."

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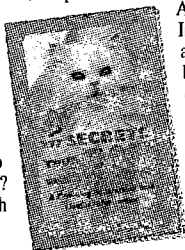
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"Mr. Drago?" Kiet said.

Gunther Drago buried his face in his hands. "You'd get drunk, too, if your world-famous mom was visiting you today."

11:50 A.M. *MOTHER KNOWS BEST*

Four kilometers north of downtown on Richard Nixon Boulevard, Hickorn International Airport sprawled on a malarial plain. A tiered stucco affair, the terminal resembled a stale wedding cake. A sign on its red tile roof proclaimed to uncongested airspace: H CKO N. Though the airport's pace was torpid on a busy day, the facility was truly international; the only practical way out of the kingdom was up.

Inside, on a cracked teak bench beneath a ceiling fan that paddled slabs of hot, humid air, Kiet and Binh awaited the arrival of Eunice Dove. Gunther Drago had confessed no crime except escaping a domineering mother. That explained the pre-dawn drinking bout, not that Drago a.k.a. Dove didn't enjoy the sauce on any occasion.

Binh convinced Kiet to keep Drago in custody pending further investigation. If nothing else, they could charge him with fleeing a police officer and being drunk in public, although there was nothing on the books prohibiting the latter. He had also cajoled Kiet into picking up Mrs. Eunice Dove.

"Why, please, captain, would we wish to meet this woman when her son changed his identity and persona and ran halfway around the world to be free of her?"

"Don't you see, superintendent?"

"No."

Binh sighed theatrically and explained, "I don't know about you, but there're too damn many coincidences to suit me."

"Coincidences?"

"Hell, yes. A terrorist statement is made against the HSE. Simultaneously a soldier of fortune who actually isn't is busted in the same area for a drunken vehicular attack on Luong's national hero. Now his mother is riding into town like the cavalry. If she isn't in on it, she's gonna lawyer the both of them up, and we won't get a peep from her unless we catch her now. The element of surprise, you know."

"Of course," Kiet said wearily. "A conspiracy."

"It's coming back to me. Eunice Dove used an assistant on her show. A fat kid in an apron. When I left the U.S., Eunice and her show were just getting to be big-time. It's called *Good Grease*."

"Excuse me?"

"The theme is healthful deep-fried cookery. Eat what you love with a clear conscience." Binh fluttered a palm. "Make that a semi-clear conscience. We're not talking watercress and tofu here."

"Americans do not consider deep-fried food healthful?" asked a puzzled Kiet.

"Go figure. They're really weenies when it comes to saturated fat and cholesterol."

The Royal Air Luong shuttle from Bangkok, an ancient turboprop, made a jolting landing and taxied to the terminal. Kiet and Binh walked out and waited at the bottom of the portable stairs.

They identified Eunice Dove by process of elimination. She was the only Caucasian and was twice as large as any other passenger. Wearing a flowered dress, with a cloth bag slung over each broad shoulder, she lumbered onto the tarmac. Her round face glistened with perspiration, and she had her son's beady, suspicious eyes.

Eunice Dove looked at Kiet's identification and at the immaculate Binh and said, "What's he done now?"

"As yet, madam, we have not fully determ—"

"Never mind. I can believe the worst," Eunice Dove said, brushing by them. "Explain to me inside where it's air-conditioned."

The terminal was not air-conditioned. Eunice Dove made do by fanning herself with a newspaper. Kiet related the drunken driving arrest and the mercenary soldier persona but did not mention the Mad Cow or any of Binh's suspicions.

"That boy! Gunther Drago? Oh please!" Eunice said, shaking her head. "He is going to be exceedingly unhappy to see me now, knowing that I'll give him a piece of my mind and then some."

"Your son did not invite you to visit?"

Eunice Dove cackled. "Lord, no. Eugene is a runaway."

"He ran away from home as a child?" asked a puzzled Binh.

"In many ways a child. He was twenty-six at the time. He was too old to put on a milk carton. I spent a fortune in private investigators. Thanks to the success of *Good Grease*, I could afford it. Eugene finally realized it was fruitless to keep running and agreed to meet me here."

"Is fried food unhealthy?" Kiet had to ask. "Is this an issue in your country?"

Eunice squeezed Kiet's hand. "Everything's relative, dear. You look like a man who appreciates a hearty meal. There are documented cases of people in their forties dying from a diet of yogurt and pasta salad."

"That stuff's bad for you?" Binh asked.

Eunice clucked her tongue. "The poor wretches were absolutely miserable and lost the will to live. Fried chicken and doughnuts in their diets would have been lifesavers. Anyway, when can I see my boy?"

"Mrs. Dove," Kiet said, "to your knowledge, was Eugene involved in any illegal activities?"

"Something associated with the mercenary soldier nonsense? Hardly. Eugene isn't capable. He is a rebellious youngster with a wee bit of a drinking problem given to adventure fantasies. He reminds me

so much of his father, wherever *he* is. Now, I presume you are taking me to see him."

Binh's pager and cellular telephone chirped simultaneously. Kiet flinched. "Sarge," Binh said to the caller, "you don't have to page and call at the same time. That's not how it works. Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. Yikes. Uh-huh, uh-huh. ¡Ay caramba! Okay, yeah, calm down, we're on our way over."

"Sergeant Lee, our desk sergeant?"

"Yeah. A low-tech dude. Superintendent, you ain't gonna believe this. We gotta bug out to National Stadium *mucho pronto*."

"Gentlemen, my visit?"

"Please take a taxi into the city, make yourself comfortable at your hotel, then go to police headquarters. We should be back by then. Shouldn't we, captain?" Binh shrugged.

"Could Eugene be released on bail? I have an errand to run. I could cash a check."

Kiet looked at Binh. "Bail?"

"That's where in some countries you pay a court money to let a prisoner go," Binh explained.

"No, madam. A pre-trial prisoner can leave my jail when I say he can."

"Oh good. I'm so relieved."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, when you inquired about Eugene and illegalities, there is one little thing. I renegotiated my *Good Grease* contract, and my agent arranged a tie-in for a newspaper column and a book contract. The signing bonus was two point three million dollars."

Kiet's and Binh's mouths dropped in unison. Binh was the first to recover. "Lemme guess. Eugene blew town the day after the moola arrived."

"No, sweetie. He disappeared the same day. I'd sent him to the bank to deposit the check."

### 1:07 P.M. *FURTHER DESECRATION*

The French had built Luong's National Stadium in the 1930's as a combination soccer arena and parade ground. A concrete and stone bowl seating thirty thousand, National Stadium rested on Savhana Island, fifty weedy hectares in the middle of the Ma San River, due west of the downtown docks.

"Gunther Drago, a mama's boy," Binh said as the Corvette went airborne at the rise in the Ma San River bridge. "That's a hoot."

Kiet closed his eyes as the car landed on exhausted springs and underinflated tires, bottoming out with a metallic howl.

"I mean, Eugene wore an apron on her show. No wonder he rebelled."



"And stole her money."

"A good boy gone bad, superintendent. I think that's how Eunice is regarding the situation. Let bygones be bygones, blood being thicker than water and so forth."

"Yes, captain, yes," Kiet said, clutching his knees. "The vandalism scene we are risking our lives to investigate—"

"Desecration is more like it as far as I can tell without more details."

"Sergeant Lee referred to the Ninh Tho Memorial?"

"Yeah," Binh said, shaking his head grimly. "Luong's greatest sports hero. Trashed."

They immediately saw the damage when they skidded into the parking lot. On the wall between the main turnstiles was a tile mosaic of Ninh Tho, star goalkeeper of the last Luongan team to have a respectable outing against international competition. In 1957, Ninh Tho held off a furious attack by a Burmese squad racked with dysentery and led Luong to a 0-0 tie. Depicted leaping to fust an enemy shot over the net, the immortal Tho was sliced in two at the midsection.

HPD officers milled around, examining crumbling stucco and smashed tile. Binh got out, queried them, and returned. "It happened last night and was just discovered by a maintenance crew. Looks like someone intentionally rammed it with a vehicle. Whoever it is, I hope he's got whiplash."

"A Jeep?"

"My first thought, too, superintendent. HPD scoured the area and came up with zilch. We can check out Dove's Jeep, but he really creamed the Prince Savhana statue. Damn! This really sucks. I idolized Ninh Tho when I was a kid. I'm sensing a pattern I don't like."

"A systematic attack on Luong's pride?"

"Yeah, exactly. Symbols of heroism on the battlefield and soccer pitch and present financial power, no matter how half-assed the Mad Cow might be. If Drago-Dove's our man, I don't get it. What's his motive? He's not a real mercenary. He's on the run from his mom for personal and money reasons. Why would he call attention to himself?"

Kiet shook his head. Binh's cell phone chirped. Kiet shuddered.

"Uh-huh, aw Christ. I don't believe this. Okay. Be right there."

Binh holstered. "You ain't gonna believe this, superintendent."

Kiet's day already had been eventful enough for a week. "Then keep it to yourself. Do not test my credulity."

Binh laughed. "Sorry, no can do. Bong Van Dong's been kidnapped."

## 2:27 P.M. *BULL MARKET*

A doughy youth named Vo Cuong identified himself as deputy director of the Hickorn Stock Exchange. He gave Kiet and Binh the tersest and vaguest ransom note either had ever seen: **BE PREPARED TO PAY DEARLY OR DIRECTOR DONG DIES.**

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"It's kind of short on specifics," Binh yelled, giving Kiet the type-written piece of plain paper.

"The director didn't come back from lunch. This note was on his desk in his brokerage office," the deputy director yelled.

"There is no ransom demand," Kiet yelled. "If there were, who would pay?"

"Director Dong has no family. Associates in his brokerage and members of HSE might contribute if the demand wasn't excessive."

"Isn't Dong loaded, Mr. Moneybags himself?" Binh yelled.

"We assume he has money that could be made available for ransom," Cuong yelled. "But with the poor state of the market, who can say?"

"Nobody saw anything?" Binh yelled.

"Or heard," yelled Cuong, sweeping an arm behind him.

They were on a catwalk above the trading floor. On soiled carpeting littered with torn and wadded paper—bid orders and fast-food wrappers—crazed disheveled lads screamed into telephones and shook their fists at computer screens. The din was constant and made no sense whatsoever to Kiet. "Same-same Wall Street, superintendent."

Vo Cuong again swept an arm at the self-absorbed rabble and yelled needlessly, "No one noticed."

The police officers took Cuong outside to relative quiet and asked the obligatory questions. Enemies, suspicious behavior by persons known to him or strangers, new information on the Mad Cow bombing, et cetera.

Binh ordered Cuong to keep the abduction confidential until they could develop some leads.

"You know," Cuong said, smiling wryly, "the explosion this morning was taken as a bad omen. Investors are superstitious creatures. The index fell eighty points. The unfortunate and perhaps tragic circumstance of Director Dong has caused the market to rebound. Why, look at Emerald Queen Tobacco! Down four and a half points at noon and it's likely to close up a point and a quarter from its opening."

"Swell, Cuong," Binh said. "Whaddaya trying to say, everybody knows Dong was allegedly snatched? And everybody hates his guts?"

"It is impossible to keep a secret on the floor. And no, sir, investors and traders like him. They are respectful of Director Dong's age and his experience. However, they are not confident of a former communist running a stock exchange, and many have recently lost money in their personal accounts at his brokerage. His past and present seem somehow unnatural and incompatible."

"The bottom line, superintendent, we've got crimes and suspects coming out of our ears and we're not within a country mile of solving the case even though the situation has the earmarks of a single perp."

"Captain, if that was an expression of helplessness and frustration, I agree."

"I had Eugene made for both vandalisms, but this kidnapping, which is too much of a coincidence to be unrelated, throws me for a curve, since Eugene is in custody and couldn't've snatched Dong."

"Again I agree. Nature abhors a coincidence."

"So what's your recommendation?"

"Lunch. We are late for it."

"Jeez, superintendent," Binh said testily, although that didn't prevent him from pulling over at the next noodle shop.

### 3:38 P.M. *GOOD GREASE*

They entered Hickorn Police Department headquarters to the aroma of hot cooking oil.

"Yum," Binh said, sniffing. "Makes me hungry for American fast food."

Evidently the contents of one of Eunice Dove's bags included a deep fat cooker. The officers in the squad room encircled her, eating, as she said, "The secret is to be hot and fast. This minimizes oil saturation."

"Doughnuts, superintendent," Binh said, moving forward. "She's famous for her world-class doughnuts."

After Binh brought them each a doughnut, which Kiet had to admit was delicious, he said, "Captain, do you retain contacts in America you speak to?"

"Sure, but not lately. A phone call costs an arm and a leg."

"Use your portable phone and avoid amputation," Kiet said.

### 4:13 P.M. *REUNION*

When he had instructed Binh what to ask, Kiet invited Eunice Dove into his office. She nodded at a photograph of him on a wall and said, "Very distinguished."

A synonym for "old," he thought sourly. "Before I have your son sent in, I am curious about your intentions regarding him."

"To be reunited with my beloved son is all I desire at the moment."

Kiet looked at her.

"Of course if the boy has committed a crime, he must pay his debt to your society."

"And his debt to you?"

"While I'm independently wealthy, I expect him to reimburse me. What he hasn't squandered on liquor, sluttish women, and this soldier-of-fortune fantasy."

"Of course," Kiet said.

"It's part of growing up."

"Yes."

"If Eugene is incarcerated, he can't make restitution, can he?"

"No."

"You and I, dearie," she said, smiling, making quotation marks with plump fingers, "we could perhaps reach an understanding on the concept of 'bail.'"

"Perhaps," Kiet said as Binh hissed at him from the hallway, saving him.

"Excuse me, madam."

"Superintendent, you ain't gonna believe this."

Kiet sighed.

"I woke up an old buddy I worked with at Washington Metro. It's like the middle of the night there yesterday and he was kinda pissed, but as luck would have it, he watches all those cooking shows, and you know what, *Good Grease* was canceled because groups like the American Heart Association were raising so much hell on account of all the artery-hardening gunk and Eunice had gotten bitter and cranky and hard to get along with since Eugene absconded."

"Mrs. Dove is unemployed and not necessarily wealthy?"

"That's the bottom line, superintendent. What next?"

"Any other suspects on the Mad Cow or Ninh Tho incidents?"

"Nope."

"Or the Bong Van Dong abduction?"

"Nope."

"Please, then, give Mrs. Dove my apologies for being called away on an urgent matter and release her son to her for lack of evidence, pending further investigation."

#### 6:50 P.M. *SURVEILLANCE*

"She's warm for your form, superintendent," said a grinning Binh.

"Excuse me?"

"Eunice. I saw the way she was looking at you. She was really bummed when I said you'd been detained."

"Captain, please slow down. If you ram them, they might suspect they are being followed."

At Hickorn's tropical latitude, there was no twilight. The sun set as if a bucket had been overturned on it. Binh had stalled Eugene's out-processing paperwork until dark. Mother and son exchanged words, mostly Eunice's. Outside, both got into Eugene's Jeep. Though a total loss, it remained marginally driveable, twisted and tracking at an angle.

"She's been yakking at him nonstop, superintendent. I'd like to be a fly on a visor."

"We are assuming that they will race to the airport and flee," Kiet said.

"Upon which we bust them."

"You informed Mr. Dove to report his whereabouts and—"

"Not leave town. Yeah, superintendent, it's the umpteenth time you've asked me. We'll put the fear of the Almighty in both of them and maybe squeeze a confession out of him and rattle her cage with a conspiracy fall and with any luck get restitution on the damage, and if they're mixed up in the Dong situation, I wouldn't expect a confession but I'd settle for a clue."

"One problem, captain."

"Right. They're not hightailing it to the airport. Just the opposite. And Eugene's driving like a little old lady from Pasadena while Mom's bending his ear."

The "opposite" was Avenue Greenspan and Ma San Boulevard. The Dove Jeep stopped in the alley behind the Hickorn Stock Exchange. Kiet and Binh left the Corvette in the next block and hurried to the alley in time to see the Doves go into the HSE.

#### 7:56 P.M. *TERIYAKI SURPRISE*

"Either that door was unlocked or somebody let them in," Binh whispered. "The plot thickens."

The door opened to the trading floor. The only light in the building was on the catwalk level, inside Bong Van Dong's brokerage office. The police officers made a cautious path through the crumpled order forms and soy sauce-streaked waxed paper. Heartburn and failed greed, Kiet thought.

As they tiptoed up a stairwell, Binh unsnapped his holster. The unarmed Kiet wished he were not so uncomfortable around guns. At the outer doorway, they heard angry shouts. Though they could not distinguish words, they recognized the strident voice belonging to Eunice Dove.

They did distinguish a string of Vietnamese and Luongan obscenities, followed by the sickening metallic clacking of a round being chambered in a pistol. Eunice's voice rose an octave in protest, then ceased. Kiet took Binh by the heavily starched collar and pulled his impetuous adjutant to his knees before he did anything foolish.

With facial and bodily contortions he referred to as "body language," the youthful captain communicated his desire to intercede before a tragedy occurred. Kiet, desiring to avert a personal tragedy, noticed a foam food container at the top of the landing. He hefted what he assumed to be a maniacal trader's lunch remnants, communicated by tightening his hold on Binh's collar and flinging the leftovers into Dong's office.

Congeaed teriyaki splattered against the door jamb. Dong fired wildly until either his weapon jammed or ran out of ammunition, at which time Binh leaped to his feet and, holding his pistol with both hands, rushed inside and screamed, "Freeze!" followed by a string of obscenities in English.

Kiet assisted Binh in handcuffing Dong, who had two suitcases stacked behind his desk. The Doves had remained largely immobile, son to the rear of mother. Binh sneered. "Hiding behind mama, Drago?"

Eugene Dove stuck out his tongue.

"Oh hush, you impudent pup," Eunice Dove said to Binh. "I stepped in front of Eugene when that horrible man pulled a gun on us. I knew he wouldn't shoot me."

"Mind telling us why?" Binh asked.

"We'll speak through our attorney after we're arraigned," Eunice said.

"Uh, Mom, I don't think they do that in Luong."

"Indeed not," Kiet said. "Mr. Dong, please feel free to clarify this."

Bong Van Dong replied by jutting his roundish jaw.

"Ah, jeez, the Vietcong martyr. Gimme a break."

Kiet said, "Mrs. Dove, have you determined how much of your money your son still has?"

"Mom!"

"Settle down, Eugene. Superintendent, our discussion has not approached the subject, nor, I feel, is it appropriate of you to pry. You released my boy on his personal recognizance. Your concern should be this pistol-wielding monster. He would have killed us!"

"No discussion of money, yet here you are where everything revolves around money. Madam, how much did your son lose on the Hickorn stock market?"

Eunice Dove glared at Eugene Dove.

"Not all, Mom, and it wasn't my fault." He pointed at Bong Van Dong. "It's this crook."

"Take him away and leave us alone," Eunice said.

"Let me rephrase," Kiet said. "How much stolen money, Eugene, remained before you realized your mother had tracked you down and you decided to recoup it on the stock market? What is that term, captain, doing a murder?"

"Making a killing, superintendent. Dong probably sat in some bar while Gunther Drago was playing bigshot, buying drinks. He probably let it slip that he was tapping out fast. The rest was a piece of cake for Dong."

"Mrs. Dove, perhaps you were informed by your investigators before you arrived in Luong. Your errand this afternoon was a visit to Director Dong."

After a thunderous sigh Eunice said, "If I clear the air, can we go?"

Kiet nodded. "I will conclude that you became lost en route to the airport."

"I was willing to forget what Eugene had done, but after persecution by do-gooder fringe groups like the American Medical Association, my show was canceled. I needed the money."



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"Why did you go to Dong? To learn how much your son's accounts were currently worth?"

"Yes. This charlatan said he'd lost everything. I smelled a rat. No matter how badly you invested, it's rare that you lose everything."

Binh laid a suitcase on Dong's desk and snapped his fingers at the director, "Key?"

Bong Van Dong stared straight ahead.

"Okay, fine," Binh said, aiming his pistol at the latch.

"Captain," Kiet said, unlatching the unlocked case.

Binh whistled at the cash. "Dollars, francs, yen. A smorgasbord of hard currency. He probably didn't invest a dime. Same-same with some other investors. The market is the pits, so it was a cinch to say sorry, Charlie, when somebody lost a bundle. If you got tired of riding the market into ruin, he'd pretend to sell the stock he hadn't bought in the first place and cash you out. Eugene was his solid-gold sucker, though."

"I presume your kidnapping was a ruse, to explain your disappearance. Please do not inconvenience yourself by answering," Kiet said to Dong, who did not.

"The sixty-four zillion dollar question," Binh said. "Who did the Mad Cow and the Ninh Tho mosaic and why? Just a wild guess, superintendent, but I think we can narrow it down to these two clowns."

"Eugene," Eunice said.

Eugene Dove picked at his fingernails and mumbled, "I don't remember every last detail."

"That's because you were drunker'n a skunk. He told me that he had confided to Dong that he was dreading the arrival of his very own mother, if you can imagine, and Dong said something to the effect that he could kill two birds with one stone, play out his mercenary soldier image and make statements that would be interpreted as political. The political acts would be provocative and lead to public demonstrations and violence that might shut down the airport. Well, it didn't happen, did it?"

"No," Kiet said.

Binh shrugged and smiled. "Luongans don't get all bent out of shape about stuff like other people do."

"Enough confusion could ensue to ease Dong's escape," Kiet said.

"Old commie habits," Binh said. "He must've had mixed emotions."

Bong Van Dong charged toward the window. Binh tripped him as he dived, deflecting him into the metal frame instead of glass. Dong rebounded and slumped, eyes rolling. Binh caught him around the waist before he hit the floor, eased him onto one side, and said, "The Tet offensive kind of went this way for him, too. Should we head back to headquarters to wrap this thing up, superintendent?"

"Please."

"Superintendent Kiet, are you married?" Eunice Dove asked.

"Yes, yes, I am," Kiet lied desperately.

10:24 P.M. *WRAPPING THIS THING (AND THE DAY) UP*

"Dong's in the cooler, the Doves are at Hickorn International, and we verified Eugene's investments, dipped into the contraband cash for sufficient bucks and yen to pay to replace the Mad Cow and repair the Ninh Tho mosaic. Not a bad day, superintendent."

"Not a bad day," Kiet agreed as he sorted the day's mail. "Look at this."

Binh perused the telephone bill Kiet had given him. "Jesus, it's big enough to choke a horse!"

"That is slang for exorbitant? If so, yes. This is a western carrier, and they demand to be paid in hard currency. What, please, is a roaming charge?"

"Part of a telecommunications ripoff. C'mon, did I use the cell phone that much?"

"How much is 'constantly' I cannot say."

"Har-de-har-har. We took this off of a dope skell. Should we have to pay?"

"The bill is for the service, captain, not the tiny telephone itself."

"How are we gonna pay?"

"I hate this almost as much as you do, but we shall be forced to sell the staff car."

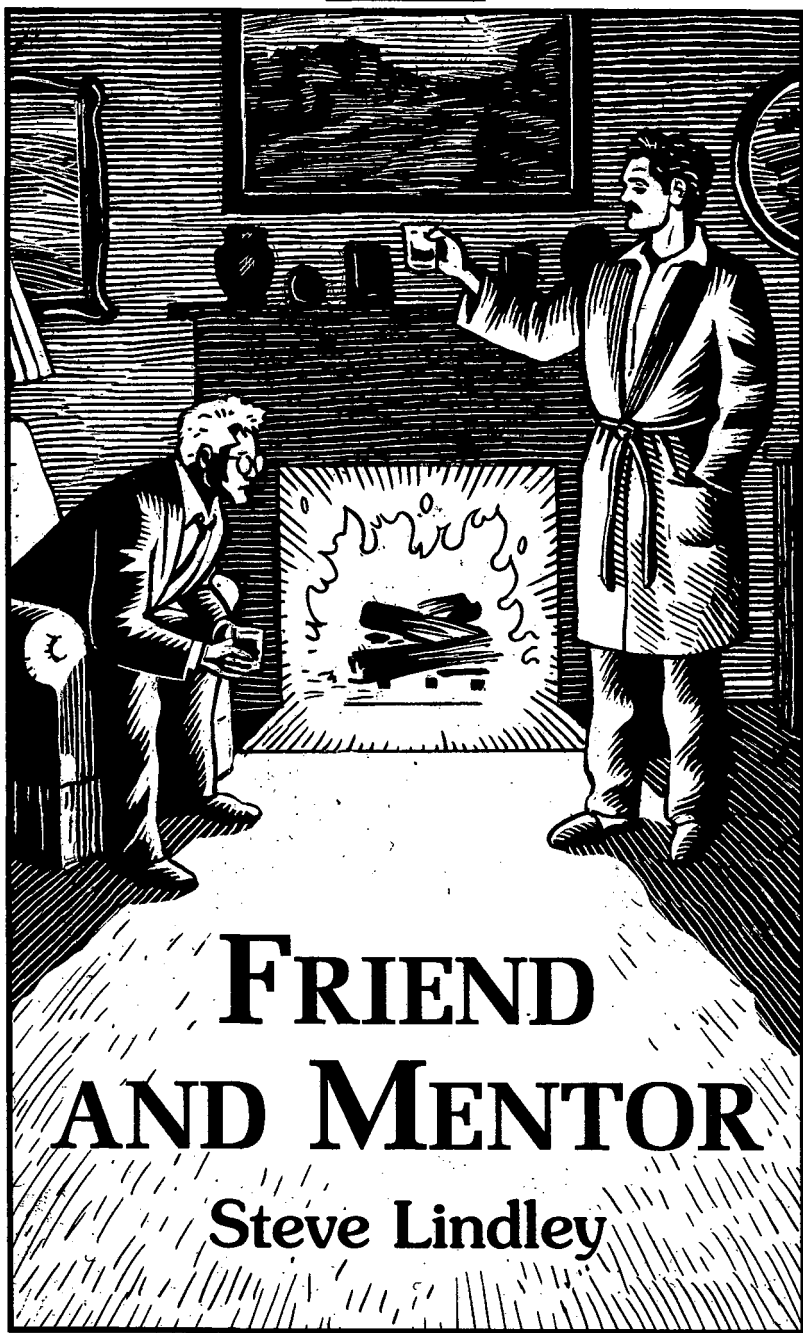
"My 'Vette?" Binh cried.

"Alas," Kiet said. "There is no surplus in the budget."

"Have I told you, superintendent, life ain't fair?"

Perhaps he had, Kiet thought. But how did that saying apply in this case?

FICTION



# FRIEND AND MENTOR

Steve Lindley

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**I**t was late, very late, when he rang the doorbell to my apartment. I happened to be up still, for no reason I can remember except that it was raining and a hard rain always keeps me from sleep, you can ask anyone that, I've always complained of it.

And though I was up, on my feet even, leaning against the fireplace mantel, listening to the waves of rain upon the window drown out whatever chatter was playing low on the radio, the harshness of the buzzer startled me enough to raise the sound of my pulse to my ears. I glanced at the clock in the foyer and can tell you it showed just past one, but I didn't move, as I expected no visitor and guessed the ringing to be a mistake, meant for one of my neighbors. It wasn't until the buzzer rang a second time, longer, insistent, that I went to the intercom and asked who was downstairs.

"David, it's Harold. Are you up?"

The humor in the professor's question slipped past me at the moment, I was so surprised by his unannounced arrival at my door and at such an hour. He told me later that he had seen my lit windows and that his question was as much a statement. I never did ask him if he would have turned around and walked home had he seen my windows dark; he lives only a mile or so from my building, but the rain was unrelenting and few buses run at that time of night.

Of course I buzzed him up, waited on the landing as his footsteps came heavy and tired up the stairs. When he turned onto the last flight, he tilted his head up to offer me a thin smile that disappeared as soon as his chin dropped back down.

I took his hat and coat, both still dripping, and ushered him into the front room, gave him some scotch, single malt, since that was what I was drinking and I could see he needed something to flush the pallor from his face. We each muttered about the weather, and it was then he mentioned the light in my windows. He settled into my recliner, and I went back to the fire, grateful for the heat as I was in my robe and pajamas, barefoot, and the damp the professor had brought in with him was giving me a chill.

We were silent for a short time. Naturally, at this point I should have asked him what he was doing wandering the streets on a night such as this and what would bring him to my home. But you have to understand, the weight of the question itself kept it from rising to my lips. Though I have known Professor Althoff for over two decades now, since my junior year at Loyola, in that time he has visited me only twice, once when he and his wife dropped in on a party I threw for the faculty of our department and, again, five, maybe six, years later, after he tossed me a consulting fee for a video project that had soured and the two of us sat in my front room on a night not unlike this one discussing how to salvage it.

This is not to say we have been strangers; no, our continuing affli-

ation with the university and work outside it have kept us close. But we have never had one of those intimate friendships, the type with shared secrets or late night surprise visits, so I was willing to wait while Althoff sipped my scotch and braced himself to explain why he was sitting in my chair.

"Hell of a fire," he finally said, staring into it rather than at me.

The fire was unusually high, and I had carelessly left open the screen. I closed it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was chilled. Would you like me to crack a window?"

"No. God, no."

I took my cigar from the ashtray on the mantel, relit it.

"How is Elaine?" I asked, the question so natural and casual I couldn't imagine Althoff suspecting how deliberately I had chosen it.

He gave no reply, continued staring into the fire. Eventually his eyes drifted, taking in the room, its corners, the dark hallway leading long and thin to the kitchen's light.

"I forget," he said, finally, "just how large this place really is. Each time I'm here."

I may have offered a grunt.

"One thinks apartment . . . and a working fireplace to boot. How did you manage that?"

"They tore out the sealed chimney when they renovated into condominiums. I've told you that before."

"Oh?"

"Each time you've been here."

"Oh."

One thinks apartment. The first time he'd said it had been at the party. He and Elaine had been the last to arrive. They had been forced by one of Althoff's clients to attend the Chicago Film Festival on one of its many off nights during its stumbling infancy and had walked in the door as someone else was leaving. They were both halfway through their own party, he a little drunker than she, and he held her arm for support as he leaned back and waved at the ceiling, bellowing, "One thinks apartment . . . and by God, what is that, a working fireplace? How did you manage this, Shay?"

I had met Elaine before but only briefly, usually as she entered her husband's office to summon him pleasantly, if impatiently, home. Most of our communication had been over the phone; she was a voice interrupting work. That night we spoke alone for the first time while her husband worked a room of envious faculty members always demanding his attention.

She was my age, ten years the junior of the man whose name she'd taken. I showed her my kitchen, only because she was surprised when I told her I'd made the hors d'oeuvres, each dish from scratch. We had

a drink there, talked mostly about Althoff, of course, even as she stood there alone before me in a black cocktail film festival dress, her nude arms and legs and neck as stark as the kitchen tile floor. And when the overhead light became too bright for the liquor in our eyes, we went, together, out into the cool of the back porch night and discussed a dance of subjects we would not have felt guilty discussing with her husband standing right there with us, except that he was not there with us.

Still, you have to understand, even then I had considered nothing wrong in her or my actions. I went to bed that night thinking not of her but of the impression my party had left upon my peers. A full week later, however, I was in her husband's office when she knocked and entered. It was the first time I had seen her since the party, and we shared a glance that should have been casual but contained all the intimacy we had unwittingly created. Elaine would tell me later she was as surprised to see it in my eyes as I was to read it in hers.

"An unusually large apartment," Althoff said, and he took another sip of my scotch. "So much space for one man. How long have you lived here now, David?"

This was the second time this night he had addressed me by my first name. For two decades he had called me Shay, and I had addressed him as "professor." At first I had thought the use of the more familiar name a moment of weakness, of need. But now there was color in his cheeks, and the hand holding the scotch was steady.

"Some time now," I said. "I purchased it in '82, I think. Why?"

"Too much space for one man. Nothing to hear but the echoes of his own footsteps. This home aches for more. It was meant to be purchased with a wife in mind, if not in hand. A family even. You don't have a family, David. Why not?"

I coughed out a plume of smoke, half amused, half shocked by this sudden candor, bordering on rudeness, from my old professor and business associate. I kept my shock checked, finished the cough as a chuckle.

"I hope it wasn't your concern that I might be lonely that brought you out tonight," I told him. "Because if I thought for a minute you risked pneumonia—"

"There was a time, and it doesn't seem like so long ago until you count the years, when you used to see girls. One after the next. You'd introduce them to me."

"Girls."

"Yes, so many of them were. The ones you chose to play with. There were a few exceptions."

"I don't understand," I said.

"No? What don't you understand?"

"Your point, professor. This entire subject. I suppose in my college



days I might have felt some boyish need to display any young woman who consented to pizza and a movie—”

“College and beyond, yes.”

“—offering you a brief glimpse into my personal affairs.”

“Not so brief, really. Not that I ever minded it, but the practice did continue for some time. And then, poof, it ended, just like that.” He made a dismissive gesture with his free hand. “It’s hard to say when, until you count the years. Nineteen eighty-six. ’Eighty-seven, more likely.”

I drew on my cigar, drummed my fingers on the mantel to keep them from reaching for my glass. Nineteen eighty-seven. The year was etched onto the back of a watch I kept tucked in a dresser drawer, the Rolex Elaine had given me on my thirty-fifth birthday. It was on a summer night of that year that we had spoken on my back porch while her husband held audience in my front room.

“’Eighty-six,” I parroted, blowing out smoke.

“’Seven, I think.”

“The year you lost track of my social life?”

“All traces vanish.”

I reached casually for my scotch, took a long swallow.

“And I never knew you were tracing it at all.”

“It’s concerned me only recently.”

“Are you all right, professor? Would you like another drink?”

Althoff examined the little scotch left in his glass, then stood and walked across the room to my bar for another.

“I worry about you, David,” he said. “So much work. So little play.”

“I’m no longer your student, Harold. You don’t have to worry about me.”

If he was surprised at my using his first name, he didn’t show it.

“No?”

“I have no reason to speak of the women I know to you, and the women I know have enough reason not to phone me at work short of an emergency.”

I crossed the room to meet him at my bar, held out my glass to him. He filled it.

“Is that it, then?” he asked.

“Of course,” I told him, dropping my hand onto his shoulder as he poured. “What makes you think I’d tolerate some bimbo phoning us in the middle of an editing session to solidify plans for a Saturday night?”

It wasn’t until I had turned my back to him and was halfway back to the fireplace that he spoke again.

“Sounds like something my wife would do.”

“Oh?” I said over my shoulder and, when I was back to my cigar at the mantel, “What’s that?”

"Interrupt one of our sessions. Every other session. Saturday night plans. Lunch plans. Whether I want mustard or mayonnaise on my ham sandwich plans."

His voice rose with each plan. He was still holding the bottle of scotch.

"Well, that's different, isn't it?"

"From one of your bimbos? How is it different?"

"She's your wife. And it's your office."

"That's right. My wife. But it's still an interruption."

"I never considered it a problem."

"Oho. I'm sure you didn't. Each and every visit a very special moment in itself, was that how it was, Shay?"

The rain continued to rip against the windows. The fire had settled, but its flame still cast rolling shadows into the dark of the foyer. The professor and I were both on our feet, facing one another, yards apart. He had yet to put down the bottle of scotch.

"I was never bothered by her visits," I said softly. "If that's what you mean."

Of course I had by now realized he knew of, or at least had suspicions about, my affair with his wife. And I had an idea how he might have found it out. How so very dull and typical that Elaine would let its existence slip now that it was over, after so many years of secrecy, so much caution, so many nervous moments escaped, scribbled into pillow giggles a night or two later.

I had told Elaine only recently that I would no longer be seeing her. Mondays were our nights, the night her phantom aerobics class met. I know what you're thinking: aerobics indeed. But I am referring to an affair that lasted nearly twelve years, and if you believe one of such a duration could exist based on sensuality alone, I just might find your insult flattering.

However, her demeanor had been growing colder over the last year or two, a reflection of mine perhaps, so I thought she might have been prepared for the moment, even ready to bring up the idea herself. In short, I thought the affair was over and, in my callousness, imagined she felt the same as I, as she had felt with me so many emotions over so many years.

What I didn't know was that she had simply grown comfortable while I had grown bored. You know how these affairs die.

But no, you shake your head. You have no idea at all, so innocent and pure, so self-righteous in your lack of understanding. All right, then, I'll tell you: when the excitement turns to anxiousness and the regular weekly meetings become a chore, when thrill is dulled by conscience, then you're a fool if you continue to play the risk.

So I ended it. In her home on an evening when her husband was out of town. I stood in their front room suffering her shrieks and insults,

her pleas, and finally her threats. But I stood firm, not allowing her to touch me even physically, fortified by knowing that while the only way to keep from hurting her would be to let the affair continue, the only good and true thing to do was to end it.

Now I stood in my own front room, facing her husband. Imagine my dilemma. I couldn't tell him the affair was over without admitting its existence, and I couldn't even use as my defense my terminating it without being guilty of humiliating his wife.

Althoff continued staring at me for second after second, each interminable. Finally he put the bottle of scotch on the bar, made his way slowly back to the chair. His shoes were still soaked; they squeaked as he walked. He dropped into the chair with a sigh, took his time before he spoke again. He looked so tired, so much older than he had when I'd last seen him.

"I'll be out of town for a while, Shay."

"Oh?"

"The Trinidad and Tobago shoot."

"The travel piece?"

"Yes."

"You turned that down two, three months ago."

"No one else picked it up at their price. I've rethought it. I want it."

"But I thought you were scheduled to shoot that CBOT safety video all this week and the next."

"I am. That's why I'm here."

For a moment, and only a moment, I felt so weightless in my relief that I feared I might break into laughter and was ready to turn away to hide the look on my face until I was able to step back from the instant and ignore the professor's words, words I was all too anxious to accept. The drudgery of our business day had nothing to do with why he was here before me in the middle of the night, and he had yet to explain why he had chosen to walk through the storm rather than pick up the phone.

"Of course, you'll have to take over the CBOT shoot," he continued. "I'm sure there won't be a problem. You're familiar enough with the crew."

Then again, perhaps the professor was still uncertain about my relationship with his wife. All that earlier madness might have been a test, one I had passed.

"It will be a good opportunity for you," he said, and then he swirled my single malt around the base of my Villeroy & Boch double old fashioned glass while still seated comfortably in my recliner before my warm fire.

This time I did turn from him to hide the look on my face.

A good opportunity for me. And how many of those did he think he had handed me over the past twenty-some years? Perhaps the first

two or three. A period of apprenticeship. But since then I had been doing Althoff's work beside him, or without him, as schedules demanded. Yet always he would find that moment in our conversations to drop a line demanding my thanks, my acknowledgment of his tutoring. My humility. My subservience.

And always I ignored it. Out of respect, yes. But I ask you, at what point does the man who once taught you become an equal? How much knowledge must be accumulated by the student after his classes end, how much more must one know? How superior did I have to be to that smug old bastard squat withering in my chair before I was allowed the congratulations bestowed upon him by our peers, filtered down to me on his whim?

Of course . . .

Of course I tell you this only to demonstrate the man's arrogance. At the time I simply turned away; it was late and we were both tired, and when I turned back to him, I calmly asked, "The crew isn't going with you?"

"No," he said. "The islands insist on using their own."

"When are you leaving?"

"Right away. This morning."

"You're joking."

"Hardly. I was supposed to be in Port of Spain a week ago. My flight leaves in—" he checked his watch "—under four hours. They've been going over locations since last Tuesday. I'll be playing catchup."

"I don't understand. When was all this decided?"

"Only recently," Althoff said.

He leaned on his right hip with a grunt, reached into the left side pocket of his sportscoat. The jacket was old and well worn. Its pockets were stretched and hung low and puffed.

He extracted a key, examined it, grimaced, and wiped it on his pants leg. I imagined it must have been wet, his jacket soaked through. He tossed the key onto the table beside him.

Even halfway across the room I recognized that bit of blue plastic marking it as the spare key to his house. It was handed over to me perhaps once every other year when he and Elaine vacationed. They kept cats.

So that was all it was, I thought. He had come through this night in order to hand me his key was all. And as I thought it, that weight lifted again, leaving me nearly giddy. I drowned the giggle with the last wash of scotch in my glass, feeling like a guilty schoolboy who had just snuck away home under the nose of an inquiring teacher; indeed, my professor. I left my empty glass on the mantel, carried my ashtray and cigar to the couch.

"Well, I envy you," I said, settling into the cushion.

"Do you?" And the manner in which he asked the question once

again set me on edge. He seemed genuinely perplexed that I might envy him anything and continued to stare at me as if demanding I explain my offhand comment.

Instead I simply leaned forward and picked up the key. It was indeed wet. Wet and sticky. Understand, however, that I did not look at it, as my eyes were locked onto Althoff's inquiring stare. I dropped it into the pocket of my robe and absently wiped my fingertips on my lapel.

And Althoff smiled then, the first genuine smile he had offered me since his arrival. When I returned it, he broke into a laugh, and I in turn laughed right along with him, releasing all the tension of the night. The two of us sat laughing at one another like madmen until Althoff stood and went back to the bar. He refilled his glass, shook his head. He had taken a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to dry a tear of laughter from his eye.

"God, I'll miss you, Shay."

"Miss me? Why? How long do you plan to be gone?"

"I'm not sure."

He had moved to the fireplace. The fire had waned. He busied himself stoking it, the handkerchief wrapped around the poker's handle.

"I don't understand."

"You keep saying that."

"Well, what about Elaine?"

"What about her?" he asked.

"The university doesn't give her the latitude it does you. She'll have to notify her department of when she'll be returning."

Though he was facing the fireplace, I could see most of his profile. The flame's light playing gold upon it showed me a look of sadness so intense I wondered what kind of sorrow could contort a man's face so.

"Elaine," I said, "will be joining you?"

Still no answer. And I realized that what I read in his face was loss. Professor Althoff's wife would not be accompanying him to Trinidad.

Of course you, and now I, know why she would not be joining him. But imagine how my mind raced at that moment. Althoff had just handed over to me the key to his house, which I had imagined would be standing empty in his absence. If that were true, it would mean Elaine had already left him, that the threats she had made when I ended our affair were more than just threats as I had rightly suspected they might be. And in such a case I had no doubt she would have told her husband everything about us, if only to cause the pain apparent in his face.

If that were so, why would he trust me with the key to his house, allow the man who had taken so much from him access to everything he had?

Everything. Including, I wondered, Elaine?

Oh, he had left her for me, all right. That's right, it's nearly a joke now. Go ahead and laugh, I know you want to, and I'll laugh right along with you as I laughed madly with the professor that night. You think that after all I've been through the past few days your laughter might possibly bother me?

But I'm nearly finished, and you promised to listen to me until I finished.

You see, as I sat on the couch, my mind flashing from one thought to the next, the professor had composed himself. He finished his third drink, even carried his glass back to my kitchen where I heard the sounds of his washing it. When he returned to the front room, he told me he had to go, that he had just enough time to get home, pack, and catch his five o'clock flight out of O'Hare.

He also asked me if I had a spare coat he could borrow, as his overcoat was still soaked through. I did have an extra trenchcoat, an old gift, in my hall closet and I went to get it. That coat is one I never wear, you can ask anyone that, anyone will tell you that.

Then, as I was carrying the coat from the closet, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the door's mirror, of the dark smudges on my robe's lapel. I brushed at them, succeeded only in smearing the stain, the burnt vermilion stain now making sticky the fingers of both my hands. I turned to Althoff, who took the coat from my arm and shrugged into it. If he noticed the look that I'm certain was displayed on my face, he didn't acknowledge it.

He didn't need to acknowledge it, after all, did he? No, he was all business again, and his business was done. Christ, I'm sure you're aware of how I hate the cold bastard now, but I wasn't sure of enough to hate him then. I couldn't even hear his words over the pounding of my pulse, back in my ears as it had been when the buzzer had shocked me from my thoughts earlier.

And so uncertain and confused was I that I stood mute and watched him walk back down the stairs of my front hall, simply stood there on the landing and watched him leave wearing my coat, his own draped over his arm, an arm that never reached out to grip the staircase's railing. He had touched nothing but the glass he had washed, the bottle and poker he had wiped clean with his handkerchief, and the bloody key I now held in the pocket of my robe.

And no, to answer your question again, it isn't that I didn't think of phoning the police the moment he left. I not only thought of doing so, I anguished over the idea. But how was I to be certain the substance on the key was indeed blood? It was very late at night and I was tired and the entire encounter had been so surreal it left me certain of nothing. And to accuse Professor Harold Althoff of his wife's murder and be wild-eyed wrong . . . well, I would only be throwing away my career.



Imagine that. There was a time when I still considered that.

So I paced the room and turned the key over and over in my hands and phoned the Althoff residence every five minutes, never receiving an answer, you know that much, you have the phone records.

And just as the incessant rain was beginning to let up, and a bit of morning gray was showing on the other side of the window curtains, and I had finally slumped onto the couch and shut my eyes to cool their burn, my buzzer rang again.

One would think that by waiving one's rights, one might be offered some bit of consideration.

Of course there were fibers from the Althoffs' carpet intermingled with mine. And her hairs . . . the woman was twelve years my mistress, for God's sake.

Traces of her blood everywhere? Why shouldn't there have been? After all, her husband made himself at home in my home for nearly an hour on the night of her murder.

As for the remains of the bloody clothing in the fireplace, evidently the great and highly efficient Harold Althoff did not stoke my fire hot enough. Then again, he didn't plan to. I told you his back was to me at the time. He simply tossed the garment in with one of the logs.

And do you think I'm so stupid that I would drop my trenchcoat, its pocket holding the knife that slashed Elaine's throat, into the dumpster of the coffeeshop at the corner of my own block?

No, of course not. You know better than that, now don't you? Or are you willing to admit that Althoff did not make the single mistake of underestimating your intelligence as well as mine?

Yet you maintain the man was never in my apartment that night, that I manufactured the entire event, imagined it, only because of his supposed alibi? Only because he was already in Port of Spain on the night of Elaine's murder, had been for nearly a week? How convenient. A man goes through the trouble he did to frame me for his wife's murder, you think he's not going to have arranged an alibi?

But you see, I've done a bit of research on my own since you dragged me, exhausted, from my life into this limbo.

No, there was no five A.M. flight out of O'Hare that would have carried the professor through to Trinidad and Tobago that morning. And of course you would have found some record of his returning to this country and flying out again.

However, did you bother to check any of the numerous flights from Chicago to Miami? No? Hah. I thought not.

Because Althoff could have flown under any name from Miami to Chicago and back. Or San Juan, for that matter. There would be no record of his trip. And how many dozens of third-rate charter pilots do you think would be willing to secret him between Miami or San Juan, on to Port of Spain, for the right price?

You'd know better than I. So think it through. You'll see how it was possible for him to manage it. I've proved it here. Right here on paper. I've drawn up timetables for you to examine. I can have him landing in Piarco International a full two and a half hours before he was first contacted by phone in Trinidad that day. Two and a half hours!

Oh, the old professor taught me well, all right. Too well, all right.

And after all I've shown you, if you still refuse to believe he was in my apartment that night, if you yet contend that I am making up this story, or that I only imagined him there . . .

Well, how do you expect me to answer that sort of mad indictment?

You see, my story is true. He was there, in my home, as real as you, believe me.

As real as you.

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# THE FOUR ROASTERS

## Eve Fisher



**T**he Stark girls. You say that name in Laskin and you'll hear legends. There were three of them: Nell, Paula, and Olive. Nell and Paula were strong-willed, hot-tempered ma-

triarchs and schoolteachers who trained innumerable generations of children through sheer terror. Olive was just plain crazy. She was the one who, each time one of her successive small Pekinese



dogs died, laid him out in a roasting pan, sealed the cover on with wax, and entombed him in the attic. Rumor had it that there were ten of them, though that proved to be a lie, there were only four. After Olive died, her daughter Matt went upstairs and pulled all four roasting pans out of the attic and buried them in the back yard.

Olive died relatively young for the Stark family; she was only seventy-two. I remember my grandmother, Nell Stark Thompson, sitting at the kitchen table, giving a sigh and saying, "She always was the runt of the litter."

Aunt Paula, sitting across from her, snorted. "It was the drink. I always knew it would catch up with her."

So my grandmother got right up and fetched the bottle out of the cupboard and poured a drink. For herself alone. Aunt Paula might have made me and everyone else in Laskin shake in our shoes if she looked at any one of us, but she just brought out the worst in my grandmother. And vice versa. Aunt Paula got so mad she got up and walked out of the house.

Aunt Paula was always mad. Basically life had handed her a raw deal. By rights she should have married a rich man and moved to Washington, D.C., where she could have moved in diplomatic and political circles and had elegant teas, and she didn't think that was asking too much. It wasn't like she wanted to move to New York and wallow in sin. I never could figure out how she came to marry Frank Olson, who

farmed a section two miles northeast of Laskin. Uncle Frank was a nice man—the Stark girls all married nice men—but he wasn't ever going to set the world on fire. He certainly wasn't ever going to leave that farm, much less South Dakota, and go to Washington, D.C. He barely made it to Huron, and then only for the State Fair.

To compensate, Aunt Paula stalked the streets and classrooms of Laskin enforcing manners and mannerisms everywhere she went, perpetually and publicly appalled at the conditions under which she had to live.

My grandmother took life a lot easier, with plenty of tolerance for the normal vices of life. The Stark talent for furious obsession was limited in her case to the English language, above all in her classrooms where God help the poor student who couldn't tell a participle from a gerund. It was just as well. Aunt Paula and Aunt Olive were burdens enough for a small town with no real concept of psychological treatment, and one more might've broken the town's spirit. As it was, everyone liked Mrs. Thompson, despite her pedagogical strictness, because of her cheerful personality and giving disposition and because whenever her sisters got to be too much you could always go and complain to Mrs. Thompson, who would explain to you that her sisters were crazy and always had been and you should know better than to expect sense out of either one of them. It was the closest thing to therapy Laskin had.



My grandmother had only one child, my mother, who moved to Sioux Falls as soon as she could find a job. Aunt Paula had six, four boys and two girls, and every one of them went into the military. I suppose it was for the relaxation. Aunt Olive, who married John Stark (a distant cousin) in one of her better spells, had two, Martha and Harold, who according to Aunt Paula personified the reasons cousins shouldn't marry.

Harold was a meek man according to my grandmother and a milksop according to everyone else. He was short and surprisingly pudgy for a nervous accountant with dyspepsia. Martha was the dead spit of the notorious Martha Jane Canary in everything from appearance to morals, and everyone called her Matt.

Matt left home at thirteen and came back periodically for rowdy visits that were mostly spent at the Norseman's Lounge. She was a true Stark, with a bad temper, a strong thirst for drink, and a great laugh, and she was the only adult I ever knew who always told me the truth. I never could understand why everyone talked about her in whispers.

Actually, when I said that all the Stark girls married nice men I was giving John Stark more credit than was his due. He was by all accounts friendly, likeable, good-looking, easy to talk to, and in general a real nice guy except for one fault: he stole. From his employer, the Laskin Bank. He and Ole Nelson, a fellow teller, took off one Friday morning for lunch and

took most of the town's cash with them.

It was payroll day, which made the haul even better. Something like forty thousand dollars, and fifty years ago that was a lot of money. What he ever did with it was a mystery because when he was caught in Chicago two months later he only had fifty bucks on him.

He was brought home, tried, and sent to prison, but he was released about two years later, dying of tuberculosis. Since Aunt Olive took him back, most people didn't feel that he'd gotten off easy. He died at home.

I have to admit I wasn't very sad when Aunt Olive died because I knew Matt would come for the funeral, and besides, Aunt Olive had always spooked me. She had lived as a hermit ever since her husband died, which you'd think would be a hard thing to do, living right in the middle of town like that. But one day she simply stopped going out, and she quit letting people in. The grass in her yard grew and grew and grew, and people started complaining. Her neighbors tried mowing the lawn for her because it looked simply awful and was making the whole street look bad, but she took after them with a shotgun filled with buckshot, so they quit. Instead they sent over Bob Hanson, who was sheriff even back then.

"I've faced drunk bikers in Sturgis, I've dealt with some of these punks all high on crack, and none of them has ever scared me more than Mrs. Stark," Bob told me one



day. "I mean, she was crazy. The kind you couldn't talk sense into."

"But she didn't shoot you," I said.

"No. She said she had more sense than to shoot an officer of the law, but if she didn't have the right to keep people off her own property what was the United States of America coming to? So I pointed out they were just worried about her, and the lawn was a sight, and that was all. And she said it was none of their business, she wasn't keeping chickens or ferrets, just one Pekinese dog, and as far as she knew there wasn't a city ordinance against letting God's grass grow as high as God saw fit to make it grow."

Bob sighed. "And she was right. So I told her, Mrs. Stark, you've got the right to do what you want with your own land. You betcha, says she. But please, says I, don't shoot at folks any more. Just put up No Trespassing signs, okay?"

And she did. I remember them very well. They were done in red paint that looked like blood. About twenty of them, one every couple of feet, all around the property. Inside, the grass grew as high as your armpit, with only a small beaten-down path where the delivery boy and mailman walked to her front porch. The windows were filthy because even if she washed them on the inside, which everyone doubted, she never set foot outside except to pick up deliveries. I remember looking around the first time I ever went there with my grandmother and my mother and wondering what kind

of person would never want to feel the sun on their skin ever again.

Aunt Olive, that's who.

My grandmother knocked on the door and called out, "Olive! Olive! It's Nell. I've got Frances and Linda, your grandniece, out here, and we've all come to see you!" Not so much as a sigh. "Now, cut that out, Olive," my grandmother snapped. "I know you're in there. The whole town knows you're in there. The least you can do is come and meet your grandniece! You've never even seen her!"

Aunt Olive opened the door. She was about as pale as you'd expect—she hadn't been out for thirty years at least—and her hair was like a wild white bird's nest, and her eyes glittered like a bird's. A predatory bird. She looked me over, and I didn't like it. "Go away," she said through the screen door and slammed the inner door shut. I was relieved. I'd heard about the shotgun.

Every year we made our pilgrimage to Aunt Olive's and every year she told us to go away. She told everyone to go away except Harold, who visited her every Sunday. I always wondered what on earth they talked about. I asked Matt about it once, and she said, "They don't. He reads her the paper while she listens to the radio, then he takes out the garbage, and that's it. He wouldn't go except he doesn't want people to think he doesn't care about his mother."

When Matt came to town, Aunt Olive told Matt to go away, too, but Matt simply shouldered her





way into the house if she felt like it and didn't if she didn't. I never worried about Aunt Olive shooting Matt because Aunt Paula had once said if Matt wasn't dead by now nothing would kill her.

Over time Aunt Olive's became a sort of tourist attraction in Laskin. If you had relatives or friends over and the conversation had run dry and it was too early for refreshments, why, you'd take them for a walk past Olive Stark's place. Everyone would stand on the sidewalk on the other side of the street and look for a while and then move on. Rumors grew. The kids all said that she was a witch. Since I did actually see her once a year, through the screen door, I was the recognized expert, and I had to admit if there was ever someone who looked like a witch it was my Aunt Olive. Which made me all the more reluctant about our annual visit.

Rumor also had it that she was rich. You see, Ole Nelson, John Stark's partner in crime, never had been caught, and while most people believed Ole had swindled John, some said John had swindled Ole and had stashed most of the cash. After all, they said, why else would Aunt Olive have taken him back, even if he was dying? Personally, I thought that rumor was a bunch of nonsense because the same people who were saying Aunt Olive was smart enough to worm the stash out of him were also saying Aunt Olive was crazy as a loon, and I figured you couldn't have it both ways.

Anyway, the rumor was there,

and in a bigger town than Laskin someone would have tried to rob her, witch or no witch. It must have been tempting even in Laskin, but while the witch was a rumor and sheer superstition, the shotgun was a fact.

My grandmother learned to take Aunt Olive's hermitage in stride, but Aunt Paula never did. "Something's got to be done about it," she would say. "She's shaming us in front of the whole town. Never coming out, threatening to shoot people. And that house couldn't look worse if the whole Davison clan lived there."

My grandmother shook her head. "Olive hasn't shot the windows out yet. And she won't. She never could stand a draft. Maybe that's why she's holed herself up in there, so she'll never have to feel one again."

"You're not taking this seriously."

"I took it seriously years ago," my grandmother said tartly. "You were the one who refused to do anything about it."

"What, and have everyone in town know our sister's crazy?"

"They already know that."

Aunt Paula just sat there in her chair quivering. She was real good at quivering. "And that house," she muttered to herself.

When Aunt Olive died, I found out why Aunt Paula was so concerned about the house: it was hers. You see, when John Stark came home from prison and died, Aunt Olive quit paying the mortgage. Laskin being what it was all those years ago—I don't think the



same thing would happen today—a whole year went by before the bank decided they couldn't wait for the Widow Stark to overcome her grief and shame enough to write a check. Even then they tried to work with her, but Aunt Olive was either in one of her bad spells or pretending to be and refused to believe that her house wasn't her house unless she paid a banker a ton of money for nothing but a piece of paper. Foreclosure was imminent. So, to keep the family from shame, and probably foreseeing a rise in real estate values, Aunt Paula paid the mortgage and had the house put in her name. Naturally, she never got a dime in rent, but when Aunt Olive died, that house was hers. Everybody knew it, and it was fine with Matt and Harold, who never wanted to live in or set foot in the place again.

However, nothing's all peace and quiet where the Starks are concerned, and after the funeral nature asserted itself, red in tooth and claw. It all started when Aunt Paula pulled out the will. Aunt Olive had made it the year Harold moved out, at age thirty, to start life anew in a small apartment over Nordstrom's Hardware Store. (He bought his house later.) This had obviously ticked her off a whole lot more than when Matt had left home twenty years earlier because she left everything, house and contents, to Aunt Paula. The only thing she left Matt and Harold was one item each to remember her by. I couldn't believe it, but Matt seemed to take it in

stride. "Just like Mom," she said, peering at the will through the smoke from her cigarette. "What'd she leave me?"

She read carefully and then burst out laughing so hard cigarette ash flew everywhere and Aunt Paula coughed like she was choking. "She's left me the four roasters!"

"What are you talking about?" Aunt Paula, having made a rapid recovery, snatched the will from Matt's hand. "That's four *posters*. The four-poster bed."

"Looks like roasters to me," Matt said.

"You read it, Nell," Aunt Paula said, handing it to my grandmother.

"What'd I get?" Harold asked.

"The mahogany curio cabinet," Aunt Paula said proudly.

"Oh, that's so beautiful," he said. "It'll be perfect in my dining room with that lovely antique mirror I got at that estate sale over it."

My mother rolled her eyes. My grandmother looked up from the will and sighed, saying, "Olive never did well in penmanship. Could be roasters, could be posters, could be iron casters for all I can tell."

"I *know* it's the four-poster bed," Aunt Paula said.

"Why would she leave me her bed?" Matt asked in a reasonable tone. "It makes a lot more sense that Mom left me four roasting pans full of dead dogs."

Harold giggled, but Aunt Paula frowned and said, "Perhaps she was trying to show her affection."

Matt shrugged. "First time for everything," she muttered. I guess



I was looking kind of stricken because she smiled at me and said, "Cheer up, rugrat. Everything's fine. Hey, you wanna come and see the place from the inside?"

Well, not really. But Matt had asked me, so I was going to go, despite my lurking fears.

Matt, Harold, Aunt Paula, my grandmother, my mother, and I all descended on Aunt Olive's house. The minute I saw it, I knew that Aunt Olive was really gone: the grass was mowed. Aunt Paula had hired that done, and she'd also hired Bert Nordstrom to come and repaint the house. Little curls of paint were lying all around the house, and Bert and Pat Rolfson were scraping busily.

Inside it was like a tomb. The windows were still dirty, and it was dark and quiet and musty-smelling.

It wasn't too clean, either. Piles of newspapers and magazines were everywhere, stacked higher than my head. It was eerie. The adults all went around looking at everything, talking just as if it wasn't possible for something to come jumping out from behind those cliffs of paper. I mean, you never know what might be lurking in a dead witch's house. I kept tight to Matt, who I figured would be my best defense.

The old four-poster bed was in Aunt Olive's bedroom looking like it was ready to fall apart. "A token of affection, eh?" Matt asked. "If you say so." She touched one of the posts, and the whole bed shook. "Won't be any problem getting this out. Should be easy to break

down. Harold, go ask Bert and Pat if they'll give us a hand with this and your cabinet." Harold nodded and went outside. I could hear my mother and grandmother talking to each other down the hall.

"I'll have to ask them to get those roasters out of the attic, too," Aunt Paula was saying. "I'm not about to climb up there."

"Oh, I already did that," Matt said. "Took them out back and gave them a Christian burial."

"What? Where?" Aunt Paula asked fiercely.

"Out back," Matt said. "In the garden."

"You dig them right up again," Aunt Paula ordered. Matt's refusal was profane but terse. "Then I'll do it myself!" Aunt Paula said, and stalked off.

And that was when I knew that Aunt Paula believed the rumors about the bank money and John Stark and Aunt Olive being rich. And thinking about the fact that Aunt Paula, of all people, could believe a ridiculous rumor like that, I realized that she was just as dumb as every other adult except Matt and maybe my grandmother, and all my fear of her slipped away. It was one of the most wonderful moments of my life. I savored it all by myself for a moment, but it was too good not to share.

"Matt," I whispered.

"Yes, rugrat?"

"She thinks Aunt Olive put the money in those roasters. You know, the bank money."

Matt nodded. "You know, you may be right."



Then Harold came back with Bert and Pat, and between them they got the four-poster down and loaded it in Bert's truck. Next was the curio cabinet, which Aunt Paula had carefully emptied. Then we all went our separate ways.

If you're thinking Aunt Paula didn't dig up the four roasters, you're wrong. She did. If you're thinking she didn't find any money in them, you're wrong. She did. Each roaster had about a hundred dollars in it along with the remains of the Pekinese, which I thought was about the grossest thing I'd ever heard. Aunt Paula was pleased as punch. She had foiled Matt and proved herself right, and that was about as happy as she ever got.

I was miserable about the whole thing. Aunt Olive had cut off her own son and daughter without a dime. Aunt Paula had won. Mother and I were heading back to Sioux Falls the next day, and I while usually I hated leaving Laskin, this time I was glad. I'd had enough of the family for a while, although I did wish that Matt would come down and visit us sometime. I told her so when we went over to say goodbye.

"Well, maybe I will," Matt said. "You never know. I get around. Hey, come on back to my room for a minute. I want to give you a going-away present."

I went off with Matt. She'd had the four-poster put back together,

and it looked even worse because the mattress was ripped from one end to the other. She went over to where she had an ironing board set up and said, "Linda, can you keep a secret?" I nodded. "Come here." I went over to her. On the ironing board were all these little wads of green paper. Matt picked up the iron and started steaming one. It smoothed out slowly, to show the engraved head of Benjamin Franklin.

"That's a—" I started to squeal, and Matt glared at me. I gulped and whispered, "That's a hundred dollar bill!"

Matt nodded. "Take a look over there." She pointed at the mattress. It was stuffed with hundreds of little green wads.

"It's the bank money, isn't it?" I asked.

Matt shrugged.

"Maybe," she said. "Then again, maybe not. Depends on who's asking." She winked at me.

"Are they all hundreds?"

"No," Matt said. "But there's enough. Mom always slept better knowing where her money was." She grinned at me. "And she couldn't stand Aunt Paula any more than your grandma can."

She handed me a green wad. "Here, rugrat. Something to remember Mom by."

I tucked the wad into my pocket. Then I stood there and watched Matt iron away until my mother called that it was time to leave.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Change, or no change? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

# HARDISON PARK



John M. Floyd

*Illustration by James Moir*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/99*



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**“H**ow’d you find me?” Cash asked. He was sitting in the passenger seat of the police car, staring sleepily out at the passing night. His wooden crutch was angled in beside him, its rubber tip propped on the dash.

The man behind the wheel gave him an amused look. “I called your mother, in Salinas. She’s still my aunt, remember?” They eased to a stop under a red light, and the driver shook out a cigarette and lit it while they waited. “I would think you’d be proud to have so many cousins around to keep track of you,” he added, exhaling word-sized chunks of smoke.

“I’m thrilled,” Cash murmured. “Give me quantity over quality any day.”

The driver grinned again, holding the cigarette between his teeth like a cigar. Philip Meeker was chief of detectives and fairly good at his job, but he looked like a bouncer in a cheap nightclub. “You’ll feel better once you hear about the case,” he said. The light changed, and they headed west on Palo Verde. It had been raining most of the night, but the sky was clearing now; the rear view mirror showed the first gray streaks of dawn.

“Ah yes. The case.” Cash fetched a sigh. “It’s a sad thing,” he observed, “when a man can’t come back to his hometown to visit friends and fish awhile in his daddy’s pond without being called out of bed to do consulting work for the local cops.” He stopped

talking long enough to stretch. “Besides, I’m retired. I’m small-town now; this is the big city. I’ve tried to forget about it, Phil. It and the way it operates.”

“Well, we haven’t forgotten about *you*,” Meeker said. He glanced at his passenger’s profile a moment before turning back to the road. The old rascal hasn’t changed a bit, Meeker thought. Faded sweatshirt, bluejeans, cowboy boots—he looked the same as he had when he left the force ten years ago, right down to the sad eyes and the game leg and the frizzy gray hair. Hard to believe from his appearance that this was the man who’d cracked the Hollingsworth case. Solved it in two days, Meeker had heard, after the FBI had been on it for two months. “Or the way you operate,” Meeker added, with a note of respect.

Cash responded by leaning back against the headrest and gazing blearily into the side mirror. Behind them the gray horizon had turned to pink. Sunrise was twenty minutes away.

“I should be watching it from the pond bank,” he mumbled.

**T**he conference room was at the end of the hallway on the third floor of the station house. It contained a long wooden table, ten chairs, no windows, and three detectives. Two men, one woman. All of them stood when Cash and Meeker entered the room. Introductions were brief, but all eyes lingered on the newcomer as he

set down his crutch and sagged into his seat. There was no resentment or suspicion in their gazes—just curiosity. None of them knew Lando Cash, but almost everyone knew of him. The Hollingsworth case was being taught at the academy now.

When everyone was seated, Philip Meeker took a second to glance around the table. “Anything new?” he asked.

One of the men, a thirtyish fellow with a crewcut and an I.D. badge that said LESTER RILEY, nodded toward the papers on the desk. “Since you left, we got statements from all three suspects and a preliminary coroner’s report. Nothing earthshaking.”

Meeker turned to study the faces of the others at the table—one a young black woman who had been introduced as Riley’s partner and the other an older man in a wrinkled blue work-shirt and jeans. He looked tired. “Either of you need to add anything before we start?” Meeker asked. Both shook their heads.

Meeker took out a cigarette, lit it, and leaned back in his chair. Despite the earlier reprieve, rain had started to fall again; they could hear it on the roof above their meeting room. Fixing his gaze on Detective Riley, Meeker tipped his head toward Cash. “Brief him,” Meeker said. “I’ve only hit the high points so far.”

Riley hesitated. “Has he been to the crime scene?”

“We stopped there on the way in,” Meeker said. “Brief him.”

As Riley began speaking, the

chief of detectives puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette, tilted his chair onto its back legs, and watched his cousin through the cloud of smoke. He had been right in his earlier assessment, Meeker noticed. As soon as the story began, Lando Cash became a new man. His posture didn’t change nor did the expression on his face; what was different was his intensity, his focus. All traces of tiredness seemed to fall away, leaving him as cool and alert as a dog on point.

Sitting there watching him Meeker felt good about his decision. The murder victim in this case was an important man, and there would be a lot of pressure to make a quick arrest. It was fortunate for all of them, Meeker thought, that Lando Cash had been nearby, and accessible.

Philip Meeker and Landonham Cash had grown up right here in this town, had played cops and cowboys and pirates in the shallow caves of the cliffs beside the ocean. Meeker was even the one who had given him his nickname after they had gone together to see the movie *Hondo* at age eleven. Even then Cash had been Meeker’s hero. Eventually the name Lanny was phased out and Lando phased in, to such a degree that almost everyone he knew began to call him that.

But there was more to Landonham Cash than an intriguing name. His schoolteachers noticed it early on and were always trying to get him to skip grades or take on accelerated studies.

Lando refused. He excelled in the classes he liked, which were few, and did just enough to get by in the rest; at graduation he held a low C average. His grades, however, were little indication of his talents, and everyone who knew him knew that. Lando Cash was easily the most brilliant mind Sonoma County had ever produced. This was the man who, after only three years on the police force, compiled enough evidence to convict Surly Dan Surlacio, pinpointed the whereabouts of the Two Moon Bay strangler, and rescued a senator's daughter from terrorists at LAX without a single civilian casualty. It was an Iranian's bullet during that incident that made Lando Cash a cripple.

It also made him a hero. A month later, with the new rank of inspector, Cash was paired with former USC linebacker Butch Carrigan, and after a two year span their partnership produced more arrests and convictions than the rest of the department combined. With unerring regularity Cash would solve the crime, Carrigan would break down the doors, and the bad guys would get caught. Cash and Carry, as they were known, soon became nationally known—at one point they were featured on the cover of *Newsweek*. And all this in addition to the Hollingsworth extortion case.

And none of these things had happened because of luck or bravado; they had happened because Cash was smart. He could

think fast and accurately and had an unbelievable talent for organizing facts in his head. Simply put, he saw things that others didn't. If anyone in the free world had a chance of solving this case and solving it quickly, Phil Meeker said to himself, it was this man sitting next to him now.

And the case was a challenge, no doubt about that.

The scene of the crime was an isolated piece of wooded land on the west edge of town. Hardison Park, as it was called, was a public nature area located on a five acre peninsula that jutted out like a pointing finger high above the choppy waters of Renaissance Bay. It was bordered on three sides by steep rocky cliffs and a guardrail and on the fourth by a ten foot high wooden fence with a single entranceway set squarely in the middle.

Twenty yards inside the entrance gate was the only man-made structure in the park: a lighted pavilion housing a row of benches, several vending machines, a water fountain, and an ATM for the Merchants & Mariners Bank.

According to Detective Riley's account, the first call had come in around two twenty A.M. from a woman named Rosemary Fernandez, a private-duty nurse, at a kiosk pay phone in the gravel lot just outside the park. She had reported, in a whispered but terrified voice, that she had just witnessed an attack on someone at the park's covered pavilion. Lat-

er questioning revealed that she had had a flat tire near the roadside parking lot on her way home from work and had seen the mugging through the entrance gate as she walked past it to get to the pay phone to call a garage. She had screamed once, involuntarily and loudly, and had seen the figure of the attacker turn to look in her direction and then move away into the shadows.

After making the frantic call to the police, Ms. Fernandez raced back to her car, got in, and started the motor. (She had decided that riding on a flat would be just fine under the circumstances.) It was as she switched on the headlights that she saw a man on foot standing directly in front of her car. He stared at her a second, momentarily blinded by her lights, then hurried around to her open window. She sat frozen, too shocked even to put the car in gear—

“—and that’s where Gustavsen comes in,” Riley said, nodding to the man sitting next to him.

Gordon Gustavsen was in his late fifties, an overweight but otherwise average-looking fellow with a round face and glasses with Coke-bottle lenses. He was, of course, also a cop, though his workshirt and baggy jeans gave him the appearance of a common laborer. If Meeker looked like the bouncer in a bar, Gustavsen looked like the guy who came in to fix the jukebox. According to Riley, Gustavsen had been off duty last night when Rosemary Fernandez had turned on her

headlights and pinned him like a deer in the middle of the road.

“She scared me as much as I scared her,” Gustavsen began. His voice held an apologetic tone, as if he were embarrassed to have been caught with his guard down. “I was driving down Hardison Loop on the way to a drugstore to get some Pepto-Bismol when I heard the scream. My window was down and the wind was blowing, but I heard it clear as a bell. It sounded like it came from near the park, so I pulled over just south of the parking lot. I noticed two cars in the lot when I got there but didn’t see anyone around. I was on my way past them, on foot, when the lady’s headlights came on. She told me later her dome light was broken, which is why I didn’t see her get into the car. Anyhow, I jumped like a scalded cat.”

He smiled a little at the memory. “She seemed mighty happy when I flashed my badge, I’ll tell you that. Anyway, I right quick asked her what had happened, and when she told me, I advised her to stay in the car and lock it and roll up the windows. I also told her to watch the entrance to the park. I went back to my Chevy and put in a call—it’s my wife’s car, really, but I had a phone put in it a coupla months ago—and then I went back over to the lady. I’m not sure exactly what I thought I was going to do about the mugger—I can’t see too well, you guys know that, that’s why I’m flying a desk now. But whatever it was that I was

going to do didn't get done anyway because the backup started arriving—Atkinson and Carter, at first, then Rodgers and his partner, a new guy named Sims.

"I kept a close watch on the fence the whole time, especially after what she had told me. No one had come out since I heard the scream, so I knew that whoever the attacker was, he was still in the park. I kept on watching the entrance gate while Atkinson and Carter went in to check things out, and that's when they found the body. Rodgers' car got there next, and he took Ms. Fernandez downtown while Sims and I stayed at the gate. In the next ten minutes or so they rounded up the only three people in the park—they're in the holding rooms downstairs. I gave Sims a ride back here with me afterward." Gustavsen paused again, and adjusted his glasses. "If you ask me," he added, "my money's on the Mexican dude."

When Gustavsen had finished his account, Lando Cash leaned back and studied the ceiling tiles for a minute or more. Finally he levelled his gaze at Detective Riley. "Tell me about the victim," he said.

Riley raised his eyebrows and his shoulders at the same time, then let them fall. "Like the chief said, he was a high roller in this town. The commissioner'll want some fast answers, and the mayor too. I'll tell you this, though—Gordy's right. We got only three suspects. One of those three is the killer. Nobody got out past

our men at the gate, and that's the only way out of that place. The cliffs aren't only steep, they overhang, so there's no way—"

"The victim," Cash said again, patiently.

"Sorry. His name's Alton Weathers . . ."

Cash blinked. Detective Riley noticed and stopped short.

"You know him?" Riley asked.

"I remember him. Go ahead."

"Well anyhow," Riley continued, "he was big in one of the insurance companies, pillar of the community and all that. Sat on a lot of boards. Earlier last night, before the murder, he had attended a meeting of the Urban League, and then, at eleven, a roast of the mayor. Everybody hung around afterward, and Weathers left around two A.M., headed home. As far as we know, his only stop was at the park."

Riley paused, bummed a cigarette from Meeker, and took his time lighting it. The female detective gave them both a hard look but said nothing. Cash turned to Gustavsen and said, "What happened exactly?"

Gordy Gustavsen looked up, his eyes enlarged to the size of quarters behind his thick glasses. "To Weathers, you mean? One blow from behind, to the left side of the head." He glanced at Lester Riley for concurrence.

"We know it was from the rear," Riley agreed, fanning his match out, "because the Fernandez woman saw enough to know the attacker was standing behind the guy. They were roughly

the same height, she said, which is about the only clue we have in the way of size or appearance."

"I remember Weathers as about five nine or ten," Cash said.

Riley nodded. "About that." Anticipating the next question, he said, "All three suspects range from five eight to six feet. No help there."

Cash shifted a little in his seat. Meeker wondered whether the leg still gave him trouble.

"Any more on the murder weapon?" Cash asked.

Riley glanced at his boss and back again. "What do you know right now?"

"I was told it was a hammer."

"That it was," Riley said. "A regular claw hammer. That's from Fernandez, too; she saw it clearly in the attacker's upraised hand. The coroner agrees, from the size and shape of the skull wound."

Cash frowned. "She didn't get a good look at the killer, but she did at the hammer?"

"They weren't much more than silhouettes, she told me. At the front edge of the pavilion, outlined against the bright lights. The pavilion, you see, is the only really lighted place in the park—the rest is always pretty dark, since the streetlights are outside in the street, where they're supposed to be. And the whole thing happened fast. Bottom line: no I.D. of clothes, build, race, hair color, or anything else."

At that point Philip Meeker sat forward in his chair, crushed

out his cigarette, exhaled a long plume of smoke, and made sure he had everyone's attention. "So here's the deal," he said to Lando. "From what we know now, Weathers stops at the park on the way home, goes up to the ATM, withdraws some cash—we know it was two hundred bucks from the transaction record we found in the machine and the receipt in his wallet—and while he's counting it or whatever, the attacker comes up behind him and pops him once with a hammer, on the left side of the head. Skull is crushed, death is instantaneous. Weathers' ATM card was still hanging out of the machine when we found him." He shot a glance at Gordy Gustavsen and the other two detectives. "Right?"

All three nodded.

Cash asked, "What else did you find? The money? The hammer?"

"Nothing but the body," Riley said. "The woman's scream scared him, we know that from what she told us, but it didn't scare him enough to make him leave the cash. We found no trace of the two hundred dollars, and we found no claw hammer."

Cash considered all this as he stared sightlessly at a point on the far wall of the room. "And we're sure nobody left the scene?" he asked at last.

"Positive. The woman said she had the entrance gate in view the whole time she was on the phone. There still wasn't a lot of light, of course, even outside the park,



but at least everything outside was open and exposed, with no cover. And the only time she lost sight of the gate was the few seconds when she ran to her car, and by that time—though she didn't know it yet—Gordy was already approaching the scene and would have spotted anyone moving about out there. In fact, he was so intent on watching the park entrance he was caught off guard by the headlights." Riley took a long draw on his cigarette. "No, Mr. Cash, the only thing we can count on here is that nobody was seen leaving from the time Rosemary Fernandez screamed until the time the police came and secured the area, and after that the entrance was guarded nonstop."

"He's right, Lando," Meeker said. "The killer's one of the three suspects."

A long silence passed, during which Cash went back to studying the reports. Everyone else in the room exchanged looks but made no comment.

"Vending machines, you said," Cash murmured.

Riley blinked. "Beg pardon?"

Cash raised his head and looked at him. "You said the park pavilion had park benches, a water fountain, and vending machines. What kind?"

"Didn't you see them?"

"The lab team was working when we stopped by," Meeker cut in. "We couldn't get near the pavilion."

Lando looked amused. "My cousin is too kind," he said. "The

reason we didn't go to the pavilion was that the sidewalk was under repair. To get there we'd have had to wade through the mud, and with my infirmity—" Cash held up his crutch a moment, then replaced it on the floor—"I would've bogged down." He looked at Riley and said again, "What kind of machines?"

The detective thought a minute. "Well, you know about the ATM. There's also a Coke machine, a snack machine for peanuts and candy and so on, and three smaller dispensers—one for stamps, one for gumballs, and one for ferry tickets."

Cash's eyes narrowed. "Ferry tickets?"

"It's pretty new. The dock for the Davis Island ferry's five miles down the coast. You can buy tickets at the park and miss the lines. In fact, you almost have to."

"Lines?" Cash asked. "The place must've grown. And if tickets are sold away from the dock, I'd have thought they'd be sold in a more affluent part of town. Davis Island used to be a haven for the very rich."

Riley shook his head. "Not any more. There's a fancy amphitheater in one corner of the island for operas and ballets and such, but the rest is farmland and factories. Hundreds of blue-collars ferry out there and back every day. Morning rush hour's a madhouse at the dock."

Cash asked, "What about the ATM?"

"What about it?"

"Well, does it dispense twenties only, or tens only, or combinations, or what? Are they new bills or old? Does it dispense anything but cash, like traveler's checks or coupons or gift certificates? We need to be sure what we're looking for."

Riley seemed embarrassed. "Like the chief said, the receipt we found in the machine was for a two hundred dollar withdrawal. I don't know about all the rest."

Cash made a note. "I'll check it out," he said. "The fact that you found his withdrawal statement in the machine helps already. It means that it was the last transaction he did. Otherwise, he could have taken money out and turned around and deposited some again, for all we know. We have no idea how long he stood there before he was attacked."

Riley just nodded.

"You said he attended a meeting for the mayor just before the killing?" Cash asked.

"A roast," Meeker said, answering for Riley. "A fundraiser, really. City elections are a month away."

"You're sure about the time he left there?"

"I'm sure," Meeker said. "I saw him leave. I was at the roast, too, representing the PD. I sat at Weathers' table with him."

"From what I've read lately," Cash said, "I'd have thought the police wouldn't be too friendly to Mr. Weathers. Hasn't he been threatening to conduct a witch hunt? Trying to flush out past corruption in the department?"

"Not just threatening," Meeker answered. "He'd already started the investigation. But that's all the more reason to be friendly to him, at the moment."

Lando made no comment. He had never had any patience with department politics. "How about personal effects?" he asked, changing the subject.

Riley cleared his throat and frowned. He was still trying to regroup after the ATM question. "Of the victim, you mean?"

"Yes. What did Mr. Weathers have on him exactly?"

Riley shrugged. "The usual. Pocket knife, comb, change, car keys, handkerchief. Wallet was there, contents intact. Thirteen dollars in fives and ones. Nothing obviously missing, except for the money from the ATM withdrawal. Like we said, the scream must have scared the killer off."

"But not enough to run for the only exit," Cash said thoughtfully.

"The scream came from the only exit," Riley pointed out. "We figure he ran for one of the cliffs instead, and threw the hammer over the edge, into the bay."

"The money, too?"

"That's the assumption."

Cash was quiet a moment. "I don't know," he said. "The hammer, maybe. But the bills..." He scratched his temple with the eraser on his pencil. "When Phil and I stopped there before dawn, there was a pretty stiff wind already, blowing in off the water. I think it would have been hard for somebody to throw a handful of

loose bills over the guardrail without the risk of scattering them all over the park. And you said you didn't find any."

A few seconds passed as everyone there seemed to think that over. "I still don't get the hammer," Riley said. "Why not use a gun or a knife?"

"Maybe he was worried about noise," Cash replied. "Also, a hammer doesn't make as much of a mess as a gun—or a knife either. Or maybe it was just planned to look unplanned."

"What do you mean?" Meeker asked.

"There was construction in progress. Maybe the killer wanted us to think the hammer had been left there by workers, and was chosen on impulse at the last minute."

"But the construction was on the sidewalk," Riley said. "Not the building."

Cash shook his head. "The cement had to be framed, and that means hammers and nails." He raised a hand. "Don't get me wrong: I still think the hammer came in—and probably left again—with the killer. But he might not have wanted us to think that."

Lester Riley ran a hand through his crewcut and put on a sour look. All this talk seemed to be irritating him.

"What about the suspects?" Cash asked, addressing the room in general.

Riley turned his scowl to the right. "You want to take that one, Pen?"

The third detective sat up a little straighter in her seat. She had given her name as Penny Wallace and appeared relieved to be asked to contribute something.

"The first of the three is a white guy, named—" she picked up a notebook and flipped pages—"Fenway. Donald Fenway. Early thirties, long bushy ponytail, looks like a young George Carlin. Two previous arrests, one for fraud and one for possession. He was found hiding in the bushes near the west cliff, wearing a gold chain and soccer shorts and a white sweatshirt two sizes too big for him, with a lot of blue smudges on the right sleeve. He also had a fanny pack full of low-grade cocaine, which is probably one reason he was hiding in the bushes. Said he was waiting to meet someone. If he's telling the truth, we figure the someone was his buyer—ten more minutes and he might have been clean. Anyhow, he said he'd been shooting pool over on Crawley Drive before going to the park."

"Go on," Cash said.

"Well, the second guy's a Mexican, twenty-five or so, with a list of priors as long as your arm. Jimmy Dominguez. Had on a bright yellow T-shirt, bluejeans, and a pair of Air Jordans. He said he liked to come to the park late at night to watch the ocean."

Riley snorted. "To watch for a dealer more likely."

"That's probably right," Wallace said. "Most of his record was drug-related. To his credit, he

had nothing on him when he was found. What he did have, in the pocket of his jeans, was an Astra .357, with a four inch barrel. Oh, and one more thing. He was loaded with cash. More than three thousand in his wallet, including a dozen or so brand-new twenties. Considering what we know about the victim and the ATM, we figure ten of those bills—well, you get my drift.”

Suddenly she stopped talking, lost in her own thoughts.

Cash waited a moment, tapping his pencil on the tabletop, then glanced at his cousin. “Penny?” Meeker said.

The detective blinked and cleared her throat. “Just thinking about Dominguez. It occurred to me that he could have been the guy that Suspect Number One was waiting for, to cut a deal.”

Cash asked, “What about the third suspect?”

“Oh. Right.” Penny Wallace frowned and flipped another page. “Number Three is a strange bird. Giorgio Vallenti, Italian, late fifties, dressed in a threadbare jogging suit. We found him huddled under a blanket against the north end of the fence. No wallet, no money, not much of anything except a fancy gold watch and a bottle of cheap wine. One really odd thing: he has a peg leg. Not a regular prosthesis, understand—this is a *peg* leg, like a pirate or something. Said he made it himself, in the Old Country. He used to be a carpenter.” Wallace paused to make

sure Cash got the full significance of that last word. “Said he comes to the park a lot lately, since he got the shakes too bad to work.”

“I wonder if he had ‘em too bad to swing one of his hammers?” Gordon Gustavsen murmured.

Cash ignored this. Still looking at Detective Wallace, he said, “What about the watch?”

Wallace shook her head. “The victim still had his on. A Rolex President.” She added, “Seems to me Mr. Vallenti is the only one of the three who has a really good reason for being at the park in the middle of the night.”

No one but Cash seemed to know what she meant. He gave her a rare smile as Gustavsen asked, “Why is that?”

“He was dead drunk,” she said. “It took us an hour to wake him up.”

Cash picked up his pencil and doodled a while on his pad. Finally he asked Meeker, “How long can you hold them, do you think?”

“Long as it takes,” Riley cut in, his voice too loud for the close quarters. “One of those three is the killer, and if the two who’re innocent wind up suing the department, that’s the way it goes.”

“What about their attorneys?”

“We’ve been lucky there,” Meeker said. “The white guy with the ponytail and the coke hasn’t been able to get in touch with his lawyer yet and won’t accept anyone else. He’s not talking, but at least his lawyer’s not here doing the talking for him. Number Two got

an attorney appointed for him, but the lawyer didn't bother to hang around—Two's the Mex with the gun in his pocket, remember, so we've got him on that anyway, like we've got Fenway with his coke, and with this guy's priors we can keep him as long as we want. The third—the Italian—couldn't care less about his rights or his representation. He just seems glad to have a roof over his head."

"Anything else I should know?"

Meeker looked uncomfortable. "The second guy's lawyer—the one appointed by the state, who left? He was complaining that his client was questioned at the scene before he was given his Miranda rights."

"Questioned how?" Cash asked.

"Patrolman Carter, who had been briefed by the woman in the parking lot, asked him where the hammer was. Not smart, I know, but it's done now."

Cash shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Questions to ensure the safety of the public can be asked before the reading of rights. In this case a hammer was the murder weapon. It's a technicality, but that kind of inquiry at the crime scene is legal and proper. Forget it." He looked at each of them in turn. "Anything else?"

None of them said a word.

"Okay," Cash said. "Here's what I need." He picked up his pad and glanced through the notes he had made. "First, I want a temporary place to work. This is fine here, if I could have it to myself, but I'd really like a separate

office someplace with a phone and a computer and printer. Then I want to see all the personal effects, and I want to visit each of the suspects, even if they won't talk. Where are they being held?"

"Three rooms on the second floor," Meeker said. "Two-oh-six through 208."

Cash thought a moment. "Do you still have that long meeting room on the ground level, south side of the building? The one with the little frosted windows near the ceiling?"

When the others nodded, Cash said, "It used to have several sliding doors so it could be sectioned off into four smaller rooms."

"Still does," Meeker said, puzzled.

"I'd like to have the walls put up and locked in place, and have the suspects moved there for a while. To the back three of those four rooms. Is that possible?"

Everyone looked at each other. "I suppose so," Meeker said. "There's nothing in there except some folding tables and chai—"

"And the lights for all four rooms are controlled from one place, aren't they?" Cash asked.

"That's right—the front section. What's all this about, Lando?"

"I'll tell you later. Could you have all that done by—" Cash checked his watch "—nine o'clock, say?" Meeker glanced at Riley, who made a note and nodded.

Apparently satisfied, Cash picked up his crutch and stood.

The others rose also, with a loud scraping of chairs. All four were watching Cash closely as if he were about to wave his hand and produce a rabbit or something. After a moment Cash noticed the looks on their faces.

"That's it, guys. If you'll get me an office and maybe some coffee, I'll get started."

Immediately Meeker said to the others, "Okay, people. Nobody leaves the premises. We're all sleepy, but there'll be time for that later. Gordy, you get Lando's quarters squared away and then come to my office. Riley'll take care of the holding rooms. Penny, you stick with me."

Meeker hesitated, then turned to face his cousin. "When do you think you'll, ah . . . know something?" The other three were already heading for the door.

"Let's meet at eleven," Cash said. "We'll take it from there."

**A**lmost three hours had passed; it was eleven oh-five. Those who had attended the initial briefing sat in a tight semicircle facing the desk in Lando Cash's temporary office. All of them were staring at Cash, who was staring at an open file folder and notepad on the desktop. Rain was still falling outside, drumming tonelessly on the roof. Both Meeker and Riley held coffee cups, but no one was smoking; the room was tiny. After a long silence Cash raised his head and studied each of their faces before speaking.

"You all wanted to know when I had some . . . thoughts on the case. Here they are." He glanced at a notepad, rubbed his eyes a moment, and looked in turn at each of the four. His tiredness was beginning to show.

"I thought the first guy, Fenway, was the most likely of the three," he began. "At least it started out that way." He paused, watching their faces. "Remember the blue smudges on the sleeve of his sweatshirt? That was chalk dust. He was telling the truth about the pool hall."

Detective Gustavsen frowned. "Why is that important?"

"It's important because the smudges are on his right sleeve. I finally figured it out: because the shirt was too large, the sleeves were too long—while I met with him, he kept pulling them up, almost to the elbows. As soon as one slid down, he pulled it up again."

All the officers exchanged glances. "So?" Gustavsen said.

"So think about it. The victim at Hardison Park was killed by a blow to the left side of the head, and the attacker was standing behind him at the time. Correct?"

"Thus a left-handed killer," Lester Riley said helpfully.

"Correct again. So if the chalk smudges on Donald Fenway's sweatshirt are on the right sleeve, that means he chalked his cue with his left hand, since that's the only hand he could use to pull up his right sleeve."

"It sounds to me," Riley said,

"that that proves he was left-handed."

Cash shook his head. "Wrong. In high school I used to shoot pool for my lunch money. Chances are, if he chalked his cue with his left hand, he held the butt of the cue with his right."

"Wait a minute," Penny Wallace said. "I saw him, too. I saw him light a cigarette in the interrogation room, and he struck the match with his left hand."

Cash shrugged. "He might wipe his butt with his left hand, too, for all I know. But when it comes to using power—whether it's a cue stick or a hammer—probably he'd use his right."

"So what are you saying?" Gustavsen asked. "Number One's not the killer?"

"Hold on," Cash said. "Consider the second suspect. The Mexican." He hesitated, collecting his thoughts. "You were right, Officer Wallace, he had a pocketful of cash, some of them crisp new twenties, grouped together. I agree that they probably came out of an ATM." He stopped long enough for Wallace to nod. "The trouble is, they didn't come out of the one at Hardison Park. That one used twenties, all right, but didn't use new bills, and according to the bank, it never has. It's stocked with older currency, what they call "teller-quality bills." Cash looked around at their faces for a minute, then added, "It's easy to crumple up new bills until they look used. It's hard to do it the other way around. And if Number Two—Dominguez—did-

n't get those bills from the victim, then he got them somewhere else before coming there. Stolen? Maybe. But if he already had three grand in his wallet, it seems less likely he'd be as anxious to steal Weathers' two hundred."

"I'd say that's a pretty big if, Lando," Meeker said, looking concerned.

"You're right, it is—by itself. But there's more." Cash shifted his weight in the chair again and winced a little. "For one thing, why use a hammer when you have a gun? Like we said, a hammer has its advantages, but Hardison Park's pretty remote, not many people around to hear a shot at two twenty in the morning. Another thing: as you know, he was wearing a bright yellow T-shirt . . . and it's not just bright, it's practically neon. I know the light wasn't good at the park, but that T-shirt would've stuck out like Madonna at a Boy Scout camporee." Cash leaned forward and checked reactions, as if to make sure everyone was following this. "If the Fernandez woman saw the attack, even for an instant, she'd have had to be blind not to see the T-shirt—and I feel the same about Number One's long ponytail."

"One last thing. Vallenti had on a watch, but neither of the others did. If the murder was committed by One or Two, why would they take his money and not his Rolex, which was worth fifty times that?"

Cash sighed, rubbed his eyes a



moment, and glanced again at Wallace.

"And I think your comment about the drug deal is right on, by the way. I couldn't nail anything down, but there's a very good chance Dominguez was there to meet Fenway."

"And if they *were* there for a business deal," Wallace said, continuing the thought, "they weren't there to kill Alton Weathers. Right?"

"Not unless it really was an afterthought," Cash agreed. "And again, the type of murder weapon makes me think the attack was planned in advance. The only problem with the hammer would have been concealing it, especially in Dominguez' case, with his tight jeans. The wallet and the gun probably took up all the slack he had in there."

"The same with Fenway's soccer shorts," Wallace said.

Gordon Gustavsen's face behind his thick glasses was an odd mixture of fascination and frustration. "So Two's not the one either?" he asked.

"Just hold on," Cash said again. "Now. Number Three. Vallenti. The strange thing about Three is his peg leg. I imagine he gets around on it pretty well, but there's one thing that bothers me. The ground at the park was soaking wet from yesterday's and last night's rain, and Phil and I poked around in the mud a bit at the crime scene. We didn't see many footprints—that's being examined now, in the light of day—but I think we would've no-

ticed a hole made by a peg leg. In fact . . ."

Cash turned to a blank page in his notepad, paused a moment, then looked at Gordon Gustavsen. "Borrow your pen?" he asked. Gustavsen unclipped a ballpoint from his shirt pocket and slid it across the desk; Cash quickly sketched a map of the park.

". . . in fact," he continued, showing the others the sketch, "I think it was probably too wet for Number Three to have gone to the pavilion at all without getting completely bogged down, and damn sure too wet for him to have made it all the way to one of the cliffs and throw the hammer over and then get back to where the officers say he was found, by the front fence."

Detective Riley blinked suddenly. "The peg leg," he said, brightening. "What if it was hollow? The hammer, and the stolen money, too, could have been hidden inside it. That could be why neither were found."

"A good point," Cash said. "I thought of that. But the leg's solid. I made a comment about the workmanship, since I have a bum leg of my own, and he let me take a look." He tossed the pen back to Gustavsen, who caught it and returned it to his pocket. "But the idea's still valid—if the hammer and money weren't disposed of inside the park, they probably came out the same way the hammer got there: in the possession of the killer."

"But no one came out," Riley

said, frustrated again. "And you just implied Number Three didn't do it."

"Well, it would also be hard to hide a hammer in a jogging suit," Wallace chimed in. She was clearly intrigued by the whole business, a fact which seemed to annoy Riley.

Cash just held up a hand. "Bear with me a little longer, folks. The thing that's worried me the most about this case is something no one has even mentioned yet: Why would the killer pick the particular spot that he did to make the attack? After all, he could have struck anywhere on the path or in the parking lot—there were a lot more bushes beside the path than around the pavilion. Why make his move in the one place in the whole park that was really brightly lit?"

Everyone present sat and looked at each other.

"Well, I'll tell you, but first let me tell you another tale. As I suggested earlier, and with your chief's permission, I stopped in to see each of the suspects for a minute. I introduced myself only as a police officer and gave each of them a form to sign regarding the return of their personal belongings."

Riley frowned. "But . . . there is no such form."

"There is now. I designed one this morning on WordPerfect and printed three copies. The form states, among other things, that one dollar of a suspect's pocket money would be used to contribute to the Policemen's

Widows' Retirement Fund unless the suspect checked a box saying not to. Each of them caught that—the first two even said a few choice words on the subject before checking the box that said no. Number Three said yes, by the way, and told me he thought the fund sounded like a great idea."

"What's your point?" Riley asked.

"The point is," Cash said, "that those three rooms were mostly dark. I had turned off all the lights from the front room before the three suspects were brought in, and taped the switches down. I told them there'd been a power outage in the storm. All the rooms were lit only by the sunlight through the frosted glass windows near the ceiling, which isn't much on a rainy day like this. And even though I could hardly see anything in there, *every one* of the suspects could see well enough to catch the statement about the contribution and say something about it and check a box."

Detective Riley shook his head. "I'm still lost . . ."

"The park was dark, Riley. With only the pavilion and the dim glow of the streetlights, visibility was probably pretty close to what it was in those rooms—kind of a late twilight." Cash paused. "I think the killer attacked Alton Weathers near the pavilion, and the ATM, because that was the only place where he could see what the hell he was doing."

"Then you're saying—"

"I'm saying his eyes were bad." Very slowly Cash turned to look at Gordon Gustavsen.

It seemed to take Gustavsen a moment to catch on. When he did, his eyes went even wider behind his glasses. "Wait a *minute* here," he said. "Just what are you suggest—"

"There's more," Cash said. "You told me you'd gone out looking for Pepto-Bismol. After what I saw in my little experiment, I came back and checked the availability of twenty-four-hour pharmacies in your area. And do you know what I found, Officer Gustavsen? There are seven of them, counting all-night supermarkets, within a mile of your house. *Seven*. Why, I asked myself, would a man want to drive five miles out of his way when there's a drug-store at the end of his block?"

Gustavsen's face was a fiery red now. "I can't believe what I'm hearing," he whispered through clenched teeth. "If you're accusing me of something, you'll need better reasons than—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything yet, Gordy," Cash said. "But those are the kinds of things that start me wondering."

The two stared at each other. The other three—Meeker and Riley and Wallace—appeared not even to be breathing.

"And what did you decide?" Gustavsen said tightly.

"I decided I'd better find out for certain."

Without taking his eyes off Gustavsen's face, Cash turned

his head slightly and called over his shoulder, "You there, sergeant?"

The office door suddenly opened and a young patrolman walked in, looking embarrassed. In his hand was a plastic evidence bag. "The contents were taken from Detective Gustavsen's private car, sir, ten minutes ago. They were under the driver's seat. Brinkley and Dabbs are witnesses."

Cash took the bag from him, nodded, and turned to the others as the sergeant left.

Inside the clear bag were three items: a cluster of twenty-dollar bills, two concert tickets, and a Craftsman claw hammer. The bills were used and wrinkled, the hammer bloodstained.

A stunned silence enveloped the room. Every eye was fixed on Gordon Gustavsen, who stared blankly at the package. His face had gone pale.

"You were right, Wallace, about the weapon," Cash said. "It left the park the same way it came in—inside the pocket of the person who brought it."

He turned to speak directly to Gustavsen. "You must have had it with you, along with the money, when you were surprised by Ms. Fernandez' headlights. Then, when you told her to wait in the car while you went back to your car to place the call for help, you stowed this under the seat. You gave Officer Sims a ride back later, so there was no chance to get rid of it, but that didn't worry you, did it? It's your personal car, not a cruiser, and there was no

reason to think it might be searched."

Gordy Gustavsen said loudly, "And it shouldn't have been searched." He nodded toward the evidence bag. "You can't use that, you know. Not in a trial."

"Oh yes I can, Gordy." Without looking down, Cash removed a document from a drawer and laid it on the desktop. "Judge Clarkson's an old friend. He signed the warrant an hour ago. Our helpful young sergeant ran it over for me." He paused and added, "We can also examine the insides of your pockets. I imagine there are some matching bloodstains there, from the hammer."

Gustavsen slumped visibly and lowered his head to stare at his lap. After what seemed a long time he said, half to himself, "I caught it with my left hand."

No one in the office said a word. Wallace and Riley exchanged a puzzled look.

"That's why you asked me for my pen, wasn't it?" Gordy said, raising his eyes to meet Cash's. "So you could throw it back to me."

Cash didn't reply. Somewhere in the building a door slammed. The silence dragged out.

Phil Meeker, not knowing whether to watch Cash or Gordy, asked no one in particular, "But why? What possible motive could there be—"

"If I had to guess," Cash said, "it was about Weathers' pledge to expose corruption in the department. The investigation is supposed to be focused on bribes and

kickbacks that took place years ago, when people like me and Gordy—and you, Phil—were on the streets." Cash shot a questioning look at Gustavsen, who sagged farther into his seat. Along with the color, all the fight seemed now to have drained from his face.

"He was onto me," Gustavsen murmured.

"Gordy," Meeker said, "I should caution you here that you might want a lawyer to—"

"He was onto me," Gordy said again. "He had called, a week ago. He was toying with me. He told me he had the goods on me, and a couple of others too . . ."

His voice trailed off. Then he sighed and said, "My attorney's Hamilton Pinello. Could I call him, please?"

It was late afternoon of the same day. The breeze was cool and damp as Phil Meeker's patrol car pulled into the gravel driveway at Cash's old homeplace, several miles outside town. The rain had stopped again, hours ago. Behind them in the west the sky was clearing a bit, and from his place in the passenger seat Lando Cash was watching the sunset in the same mirror that had shown him the sunrise fourteen hours earlier.

"We're square now," Cash said after a pause.

Meeker, who had switched off the motor, turned to look at him. Cash was sitting as still as a stone, gazing through the windshield at the house and the small

pond at the bottom of the hill.

"What?" Meeker asked.

"You know what I mean."

"No," Meeker said. "I don't."

For a full minute or more Land Cash sat and watched the gathering darkness. Meeker watched his cousin's profile. Neither of them spoke.

Finally Cash broke the silence.

"Why was he there, Phil?"

Meeker frowned. The question had been quietly spoken, almost casual.

"Who?" he asked warily.

"Gordon Gustavsen," Cash said.

"We know now that it wasn't coincidence. He was at the park because Alton Weathers was there. But how did he *know*?"

Meeker pondered that for a moment, still frowning. "I guess Gordy followed him there, in his car."

Keeping his gaze straight ahead, Cash shook his head slowly.

"Not with *his* eyesight, he didn't. Not at night. He was there already, waiting."

Meeker shrugged.

"I dunno, then. What difference does it make—"

"At about the time Ms. Fernandez turned her back long enough to run to her car and get inside it, Gordy must have come out through the gate," Cash said, still speaking to the windshield. "When her headlights caught him, it scared him. He was telling the truth about that. But he was walking *away* from the park, not toward it."

Meeker's frown deepened.

"That makes sense," he said carefully. "But who cares? It's over now. Why are y—"

"What do you make of the tickets, Phil?" Cash said.

"Tickets?"

"The two tickets we found in the bag in Gordy's car. They were for admission to a symphony concert at the Davis Island amphitheater this morning. Pretty high-brow affair." Cash rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Maybe it's just me, but Gordy Gustavsen doesn't look like a guy who'd enjoy that kind of thing."

Meeker shrugged.

"Maybe they weren't his," he said. "Maybe they belonged to Weathers. The money did."

"I considered that. But when I checked with Weathers' office, his secretary said tearfully that she knew nothing about any plans to attend a concert. Weathers' calendar showed that he was to be in this morning, at work."

Meeker said nothing, waiting.

"So I figured maybe Weathers bought the tickets last night sometime, before the meetings but too late to let his office know. Just out of curiosity, I decided to call the outfit that sells them—the fancier the affair, the fancier the ticket office usually, and the fancier the office, the more likely they are to keep good records. And sure enough they had. A young lady named Yvonne looked up the numbers on the two tickets and found the name of the buyer."

Still Meeker made no reply. Very slowly, for the first time

since the car had stopped, Cash turned his head to look at him.

"You bought those tickets, Phil. Now isn't that a kick? Those two concert tickets were sold to you, Philip Meeker, at three forty yesterday afternoon."

Their eyes held for a moment. Finally Meeker turned away. He shrugged again, and this time he was the one speaking to the windshield. "So I did," he said. "I knew he and his wife liked the symphony, and since I knew I'd be sitting at his table at the benefit last night, well, I decided to buy them to give to him. Which I did, quietly, during a break. It's no big thing, Lando—the department does that sometimes, to those with . . . well . . . influence."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Cash asked.

Meeker sighed. "Sometimes it's done, like I said, but it's frowned on. You know that. Besides, I didn't think it was important."

Cash was quiet a moment. "What makes it important," he said, "is that Gordy took them off Weathers' body and put them in the bag with the hammer and the money."

"I don't follow you."

"Why," Cash said, as if asking himself, "would someone who has just been caught in the act, so to speak—someone who has just committed a murder and thinks he might have been seen doing it—why would that someone, who is in a bit of a hurry at the moment, take the time to search his victim's wallet, to find

and remove a pair of *concert* tickets?"

"I have no idea," Meeker said faintly. Outside, the wind gusted and rainwater from the branches of an oak spattered the windshield.

"Then I'll tell you why. I think he did it because he was told to. I think those were his specific instructions. After all, those tickets weren't for a downtown performance in the civic center, or the municipal auditorium. They were for Davis Island. For a nine A.M. performance this morning—a *weekday* morning. And if those tickets were received unexpectedly late last night, they were essentially worthless unless that particular concert lover had one additional item in his possession." He paused. "You know what that is, Phil?"

Meeker just stared at him.

"Ferry tickets," Cash said. "Detective Riley told me himself at the meeting this morning that anyone who planned to ride the boat to the island better have a ticket beforehand or he might not get aboard." Frowning, Cash rubbed a fingernail along the wood of his crutch. "And the only place to buy after-hours ferry tickets was, lo and behold, the vending machine at Hardison Park."

A long, deep silence passed. It was almost full dark in the car now.

"I think you told that to Alton Weathers, Philip. I think you just happened to mention, after presenting him with the gift of the

two symphony tickets, that he might want to swing by the park on his way home—it would be miles out of his way the next morning—to buy tickets for the ferry so his prissy wife wouldn't have to stand in line at the dock with a bunch of migrant workers. And then I think you called Gordy Gustavsen, probably from a pay phone outside the roast, and probably disguising your voice, and told him Weathers would be stopping by the park alone, sometime between two and three A.M. Just in case he wanted to know."

Phil Meeker's face was as white as a lump of chalk in the darkness. He sat very still, waiting.

"As things turned out, of course," Cash continued, "Weathers did in fact go to the park, right on schedule. The only wrinkle was that he decided to use the ATM first—he was low on cash, too—before getting to the ferry ticket machine beside it. That of course wasn't important; you didn't care whether the body, when it was found, had ferry tickets on it or not. Your concern was the *concert* tickets. And even that wasn't a really big deal—after all, who would ever think to trace them back to you? But it was a loose end, and no detective likes loose ends, and this was one that could easily be tied off and forgotten, with a little foresight. All you had to do was tell Gordy, in the phone call you made to him, to search the body for a pair of symphony tickets and to remove

them. One thing about Gordy, he follows orders, doesn't he? Even when he doesn't know who's giving them."

The only sound was the ticking of the cruiser's cooling engine and the occasional rumble of a car passing by on the dirt road.

Meeker said nothing at all. He had lowered his head and was staring down at his hands, which were loosely—almost lifelessly—holding the bottom of the steering wheel.

"When Butch Carrigan and I were here on the force," Cash said, "we were in a different section from you and from Gordy Gustavsen, too. I never even knew Gordy at all except by sight; probably you didn't either. The two of you would've moved in different circles."

He studied the rubber tip of his crutch. "But even now, obviously, you're in a position to hear things that he wouldn't. Certainly you knew about Weathers' investigation. I think you also knew Gordy was already targeted, and found a way—a phone message maybe, or a note in his desk drawer—to tell him about it. And I think you were afraid you wouldn't be far behind."

Cash sighed heavily. "Butch and I spent a lot of time on the streets ourselves back then, Phil. I know a lot of things can happen in the bars and dark alleys over the years . . . and sometimes the wrong people find out about them later. I think you did some of those things, as Gordy did, and you were at risk of being discov-



ered. I think you figured that if you weren't already on Weathers' list, you would be soon. That part, of course, Gordy didn't know." Cash stopped a moment and said in a quieter voice, "And I think you decided to let Gordy take care of things for the both of you."

Meeker continued to stare at his hands. The expression on his face was totally neutral, as if he were in a trance.

"What I find hardest to take," Cash went on, "is that you called me in. You knew Gordy killed Weathers, but you couldn't reveal that without revealing your part in it, too. So you called me, knowing I'd find some way to identify the killer. You got me to do it for you."

Finally Meeker looked up and met his cousin's gaze. His face was still unreadable. "You can't prove this, Lando. You're good, but you're reaching. You can't prove a word of it."

Slowly Cash nodded.

"You're right. The only way to do that would be to go deeper into the investigation Weathers had started, to find the names of the other cops on his suspect list. I won't do that. Besides, you've got enough to worry about, I think. Gordy's no mental giant, but it may be that he'll put two and two together one day. Maybe he'll finally place the voice that called him last night. Who knows?" Cash paused, unsnapped his seatbelt, and put one hand on the handle of the door.

"My suggestion to you is this. If

you can find a way to get that investigation stopped—and that should be simple, with Weathers out of the picture—then get it stopped. You'll be in the clear. But I meant what I said earlier, Phil. Now we're square, you and me. You helped my dad when he needed it years ago, when I wasn't here to help him myself, and I've owed you for that for a long time. Now we're even. Understand?"

Meeker cleared his throat. A trickle of sweat had run down his cheek and neck and into his collar.

"I understand," he murmured.

"And don't call me again, Phil. I won't help you again."

"No," Meeker said.

Cash climbed out of the car, wrestled himself upright, shut the door, and made his way tiredly up the path toward the house.

In the dripping woods beside the road crickets had begun to sing.

Cash watched from the kitchen window as Meeker's cruiser drove away. Afterward he took a can of Bud from the fridge and sat down on the sofa in the den. As he sipped his beer, he looked around thoughtfully at the room. It bore little resemblance to the place he remembered as a child. It was redecorated and smartly furnished now, cheery and bright and attractive. His mother had sold it years ago, after his father's death, to friends of the family, who were now on their annu-

al two week vacation to Hawaii. When Cash had called and asked permission to drive over and fish in the pond while they were gone, they had invited him to stay in the house as well. He had only arrived yesterday.

After ten minutes or so he reached for his crutch, rose to his feet, tossed the empty can into the garbage, and retrieved his briefcase from the bedroom. From the case he removed a black address book, which he held open in his lap as he punched in a number on the den telephone.

It rang several times before he heard the click of an answering

machine. "Hello," the voice said. "This is the Carrigan residence. We can't come to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and—"

Cash waited for the beep, then said, "Butch, this is Lando. Just wanted you to know everything's settled. I'm here, but there was nothing to be done. Someone took care of it for us. It's a long story, I'll call you when I get home."

He hung up, regarded the phone for a moment, then stood and began to pack his gear. Funny the way things turn out sometimes, he thought as he carried his bags out to the rental car in the garage.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the April issue.*

"Voices like little angels!" Father Mulcahey exclaimed after every service in St. Sebastien's Chapel. "Niver on this airth has such heavenly music bin heard by mortal man. 'Tis sad to think of the six growin' up and leavin' the parish." As they filed out, he patted each boy on the head and offered a special blessing.

To tell the truth, the street urchins in the boys' choir were very similar in appearance: all the same size, all dark-haired, all with round, innocent faces. It would have greatly surprised the kindly, near-sighted priest to learn that there were actually *seven* of them, and that the six singing on successive Sunday mornings were not necessarily the same boys. Furthermore, it would have pained poor Father Mulcahey to know that the "lucky" lad who drew the short straw was in the parking lot outside pilfering from the cars of the parishioners attending Mass. Fortunately, perhaps, he never suspected.

The seven boys—Andrew, Brad, Charles, Dave, Edward, Frank, and George—did, of course, grow up and leave home for other cities. They "graduated" from petty theft to criminal specialties, becoming an arsonist, a dynamiter, an embezzler, a forger, a hijacker, a hit man, and a kidnapper, all successful in the underworld. They married, among their kind. One wife was named Gina. One man operated in Sandusky.

Although residing in different cities, the seven kept in touch. Each man agreed to impersonate another (a sort of temporary alias) whenever an alibi was needed. So if an APB was issued for Mr. Mott in connection with a particular crime, a false "Mr. Mott" would voluntarily surrender with an airtight alibi, threatening the police with harassment. Since all were remarkably alike, this subterfuge succeeded. All seven continued to avoid arrest.

It was Dave who spotted the little article in the hometown newspaper to which he still subscribed. A certain Father Mulcahey, retired priest of St. Sebastien's Chapel, claimed to have received a vision of the truth. Now ninety-seven, he had recently completed a manuscript about the dark secrets of former members of his parish. The frail, elderly priest declared, "I owe it to the future good of mankind."

Dave picked up the phone and dialed Frank. "Geez, old buddy, guess what?" he began. Then he read the article to him.

"Maybe it ain't real, Dave," said Frank. "He could be, you know, hallucinatin' in his old age."

"But what if he really did have this vision? We can't take no chances. Old Mulcahey has gotta be silenced and that damned manuscript destroyed—and damned soon. I'll contact the others, and we'll meet in the old hometown next Saturday night, okay?"

So it came about that the unsavory seven met again, this time with their wives, to plan the demise of the elderly priest. "The short straw does the job," growled George.

They drew. Each man stole a secret glance at his straw. "Just to be on the safe side," said Andrew, "let's all leave town on a different day after the job is done." The other six nodded agreement, and they parted.

On Sunday morning when his cook came to start breakfast for Father Mulcahey, she failed to rouse him. She rapped louder on his door but still got no response. Timidly she opened the door, then screamed. The old man had been stabbed in his bed and the room ransacked.

(1) No man and wife shared the same first initial, so Andrew was not married to Alice, Bart was not married to Betty, and so on.

(2) The first of the seven left on Monday, the last on the following Sunday. The man from Reno departed two days after Mr. Mott and two days before Carla's husband (who never uses "Mott" as an alias). They include Andrew (who never poses as "Julio"), Brad (who is not the forger), and Charles (who never poses as "Howe").

(3) The man from Utica left two days after Frank and two days before the hit man (who did not leave on Friday). They are (in one order or another) Mr. Howe (who did not depart on Thursday), Mr. Inch (who is not the embezzler), and Mr. Julio (who is neither Betty's husband nor the man who left on Saturday).

(4) Mr. North departed at least two days after Alice's husband and exactly two days before George. They operate in Omaha, Pittsburgh, and Queens. The man from Omaha does not use "North" as an alias; Frank is not the man from Pittsburgh.

(5) Mr. Lambe took off two days before the dynamiter and two days after the man from Tulsa (who is neither the one who left on Wednesday nor Mr. North). These three have, when needed, used the aliases of "Howe" (who is not the man married to Ellen), "Inch," and "Julio" (who is not actually Mr. Mott).

(6) Dave left after the forger (but not the following day) and at least

two days before Mr. Katz (who is neither the hijacker nor the man who sometimes uses the alias of "Mott"). Their wives are Doris, Freda, and Betty. Freda left earlier than the hijacker (who never poses as "Katz").

(7) The man at times posing as "Mr. Katz" left the day after Ellen's husband; the man from Omaha left later but not the next day. They include the embezzler, the kidnapper, and the hijacker.

(8) Dave departed two days after the arsonist (who never uses the alias of "Mott"). Edward left the day before Mr. Katz.

(9) Andrew is not the man from Tulsa.

(10) Gina is neither Mrs. Inch nor Mrs. Julio (who is not Betty).

As the last couple waited for their plane to take off, the wife asked from curiosity, "Did you get the short straw?"

Her husband chuckled. "Not me, sweetheart. The kidnapper got it."

Unknown to the seven, old Father Mulcahey had sent a copy of his manuscript to his publisher. Its contents proved remarkably accurate and detailed—to the dismay of his former choirboys with the "voices of little angels."

*Who actually stabbed the elderly priest?*

See page 138 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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FICTION



# AGENTS

Dan Crawford

*Illustration by Rachel Stuart*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/99*

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A young man named Zeven lived for many years quite happily in the home of his parents. Their home was in a poorly situated town down by the river, which flooded every year because the king refused to build a dam to keep the waters back. Everyone in the town was as poor as Zeven's parents, since there was mighty little besides mud to make money with, but they managed to make homes for themselves.

Come spring, things were actually worse because the thawing snow made the floods deeper, and everyone who wasn't washed away outright came down with one of the fevers that accompanies cold air and standing waters. It was one of these fevers that carried off Zeven's parents, leaving him quite alone in the world.

The grief was heavy for one young man to bear, but he knew his first duty was to see the old folks decently buried. There was no money left after the long, hard winter, so to pay for the graves and stones to put on them, Zeven had to sell the house and land where he'd been born and raised. This left him with nowhere to live. And he knew that no one in town had enough money to hire him as a farmhand.

So as soon as the funeral had ended, he put his hands in his pockets (this was all he needed to do by way of packing his belongings) and set off for higher, drier, and, with luck, richer territory. There was sorrow in his heart at having to leave the life he'd known, but the sun was bright and he'd done his duty.

"It isn't as though I was deserting my family," he told himself with a look back at the two new graves. "I know where they are; they'll be safe."

The sunshine, and this thought of his parents safely buried, were all he had to cheer him through a long, hungry afternoon. Perhaps this is why, when he found himself near another graveyard as the sun was going down, he decided to curl up against a big old tombstone to spend the night.

Come morning, he was frightened to find himself among the graves when he woke, as this was the first time he had ever seen dawn come anywhere but in his own bed. Recalling everything that had happened, he pulled himself up and watched the sun move up in the sky.

By daylight he could see that a number of the graves in this old burial ground were weedy and untended, and that three of the stones particularly were all but falling over. So he went around the little cemetery pulling weeds and propping up the markers.

It isn't as though I have somewhere else I need to be, he told himself. And there is no one left at home to tend to my parents' graves. Perhaps someday someone like me will come along and attend to them, seeing that someone like me did it somewhere else.

Silver glinted at him from the grass. Stooping, he found that it was a heavy silver star, probably worth a goodly sum of money. Zeven



looked around and spotted a star-shaped recess in the front of one of the stones. He set the star and struck it with his fist to fit it back into its place.

"There!" he said, hands on his hips. "Everything nice and fresh, just like . . . at home."

The joy of a job well done was dimmed by the thought of his parents in their graves at a time when by rights they ought to have been sitting down to breakfast. Zeben shrugged. Perhaps after all they *were* somewhere sitting down to breakfast. Right now he had to walk on and find his own.

He knew that somewhere north of his village there was a large town. He came to it after not many hours. Smelling food being cooked at an inn, he strolled inside and called to the innkeeper, "How much would a man have to work for you, sir, to earn a breakfast?"

"Get out, you beggar," snarled the innkeeper, who was bending over a broken mug that had just fallen to the floor. "We have no . . ."

He straightened and turned to Zeben with one fist raised. But looking his visitor over, he let the fist fall. "Step over here, my friend. I'll bring you a drink."

He led Zeben to a small table and a chair with its back to a curtain. Zeben sat down with relief. The innkeeper had obviously not known until he looked that his guest was not a beggar but a young man who could chop plenty of wood.

A tall, thin man was sitting in the chair to Zeben's right. Zeben could not recall seeing the man, or for that matter the chair, when he sat down, but he was glad enough of the company. "Will you share my breakfast with me, sir?" he inquired.

"Not the breakfast our host has in mind for you," the stranger rumbled, his voice coming from deep inside the long, narrow body. "He is a wicked man who kidnaps his young customers and sells them to the king's army."

"You can't mean it, sir!" Zeben protested, raising both hands as if to push the very idea away. "He has such a kind face!"

"His isn't the first kind face to hide an evil mind," sighed the stranger. "If you sit . . ."

"Here is your breakfast, good sir!" called the innkeeper, bringing a tray of food to the table. "I—ack!"

Seeing the man at Zeben's right, he jumped back four feet, dropping the tray and sending eggs, ham, and bread across the floor. The stranger rose, face pale with wrath.

"How dare you steal this young man's liberty when he has nothing else?" the tall man thundered. "If money means so much to you, take this and let the lad go!" He threw a handful of copper coins on the table.

"Stay . . . stay away!" shrieked the innkeeper, backing away.

“Don’t—ack!” Pulling his apron up over his head, he ran from the inn, tripping on chairs and the ham on his way out.

The tall man sneered. “An honest man would not have been afraid of the money.” He looked down at Zeben. “You’d better take it.”

They were only small coins, but there were more of them than Zeben had ever seen at one time. “Oh no, sir! I can’t—”

But when he looked up, the man was gone. Zeben shrugged. “I have heard this king of ours sends secret agents out among the people to spy on them. No doubt this spy knew what the innkeeper was doing and, having frightened him, has gone back to his miserable master.” He put a hand on the pile of copper. “If this is the king’s money, some of it came from my father’s taxes. Surely it won’t harm anyone if I use it for a while.”

Zeben left that inn for another, where he bought enough bread and cheese for his breakfast and for his lunch as well. Then he left the city, still walking north. A city full of spies wasn’t safe, and besides, it would be embarrassing to run into that innkeeper again.

There were other people on the road by this time, and Zeben walked along with a pair of men who knew a lot of jokes and who laughed at him as well. They were quite a jolly pair and completely took Zeben’s mind off the fact that he was homeless, jobless, and only seven copper from being penniless.

When the sun was high in the sky, the older of the men suggested they step off the road to a few fallen logs and eat their lunch there. Seeing the bread and cheese Zeben carried, they insisted on dividing their own victuals with him.

“A slice of meat for you,” said the older man, passing some to his companion. “And you,” he went on, setting a slice on Zeben’s bread. “And for . . .”

They all turned to stare at the fourth man who was sitting with them. No one had seen him on the road. He was a short, fat man with a broad red waistcoat, and he looked as if he could be quite jolly, too, when he wanted to be. He didn’t seem to want to be.

He shook his fist at the two jolly men. “You filthy bunch of robbers! How dare you plot to murder this young man for the sake of the few copper coins he has? If money means so much to you, take this!”

He threw down a small bag, which hit the nearest log so hard that two silver coins bounced from the opening. Before the coins had stopped rattling, the two men had jumped right out of their shoes. Tumbling headlong across the field, tripping on fallen branches, they were soon gone from view.

Zeben looked at the man, a bit angry at the abrupt dismissal of his two new friends. The short man shrugged. “Honest men would not have been afraid of the money. You’d better have it, lad. And don’t eat that meat, or the bread they set it on. They’ve poisoned it.”



Zeben dropped the food, staring at it in horror. "Can such things be? What have I ever done to—"

But the man was gone, leaving the bag of silver behind. Zeben stood up, looking first across the field and then back to the road, but there was no sign of the intruder. "Well now. I've heard that these secret agents of the king can appear and disappear like a cloud in a dry summer. This is the second good turn they've done me, too. It may well be that this king is not so miserable as I've always thought."

He ate his bread and cheese thoughtfully, thinking over the bag of silver. "They must mean me to have it," he said finally. "And who am I to question the will of the king?" He considered the shoes, too, but after a moment of thought decided to leave them behind for someone else.

He walked north again, letting the silver jingle as he moved. It made a cheerful sound, but he found it a bit heavy. Fortunately, by the time night came on, he had seen a city ahead of him.

"I'll be able to spend some of this money there," he guessed correctly. "And I won't be lumbered with it."

He found no opportunity for spending money right away. For quite some time he walked through the brightly lit streets, studying the shops and carts. It was the largest city he'd ever seen, and he knew that once he had a job he wouldn't get many chances to look at all the sights.

Finally he stepped into a large inn. "I'd like a room for the night," he said.

He had chosen the biggest and most expensive inn in the city, and the innkeeper looked over the boy from the country with some suspicion. "I'll need to have some of the payment in advance," he said, lifting his nose a little.

"You'd better take some of this, then." Zeben set the bag of silver on a table. The innkeeper would have to count it; he'd never had a silver coin in his hand and didn't at all know what these were worth.

They were worth entirely too much. He was given a very good room, but the innkeeper whispered to a barmaid and she hurried outdoors. Not long after that, Zeben answered a knock on his door and found three very large men outside. A second later they were inside.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Soldiers of the king, lad," said the man with tarnished epaulets to show he was an officer. "Speak up and you might not find yourself marked up. Where did you get all that silver you showed the tapster downstairs?"

Zeben shrugged. "It was given to me."

The three men laughed hard and loud. "That's an old one!" shouted one of the soldiers. "And what did you do to these people to get them to give it to you?"



"I did nothing," protested Zeben, who understood at once what they meant. "The men who gave me this money were agents of the king."

The laughing halted at once, and the three soldiers looked at each other. The officer leaned toward Zeben. "Listen to me, brother. It is wisest to speak of the king with caution, and of his agents not at all."

"Nonetheless," said Zeben, "they gave me this money."

His visitors looked at each other again. "In that case," said the officer, "you are spending the king's silver, which is permitted only to people in the king's employ."

Zeben shrugged. "I would be willing to be in his majesty's service, since his agents are so generous."

This started them laughing again. "Well, brother, we can grant your wish. Come and see what he'll give you."

They reached for their weapons, but Zeben put up no fight. Zeben had meant what he'd said and was actually looking forward to meeting the king about whom he had heard so much and whose agents had proved so kind to a young man out in the world. Now he'd learn the truth of the matter.

The truth of the matter, as it happened, was that the king was exactly as miserable as Zeben had always heard. Grasping, stingy, he never spent a penny on himself, his family, or his country until he had to. His palace was falling in around his ears, his wife had long since died of the miseries, and his daughter grew paler every day. But his piles of money were taller every day, thanks to his ability to clutch a coin until his fingerprints were visible in the metal. His soldiers were ordered to march with long steps so their boots would wear out the slower, and his daughter's maid dressed the princess in dinner gowns with painfully tight belts so she'd eat the less.

Zeben frowned a little, looking over the rich red wallpaper that had started to peel away from the walls of the throne room. The king, waiting at the far end, did not see this: there were too few lights in the big room and Zeben had tripped at one spot where the carpet was worn through right to the floor.

But the king was frowning already. He felt this saved time when prisoners were brought before him. "What is the crime of this marauder?" he demanded.

The three men stopped, letting Zeben take a step in front of them. "An exaggerated sense of humor, your most munificent majesty." The officer tossed down a large leather bag containing most of Zeben's money. "He claims he was given all this by your majesty's agents."

The king leaned forward, being careful not to put too much weight on the broken arm of the throne.

"My agents? Why would they be giving money to anybody? Particularly you?"



"They were quite kind to me," Zeben told him, spreading his hands out open in front of him. "They were there whenever I needed help."

It was the best laugh the king had had in weeks. His soldiers guffawed along with him. At length his majesty took out a red handkerchief edged in gold, which had been darned at one corner.

"You are a thoroughly refreshing young man," he said. "I'll make you a proposition. If you can answer three of my riddles, you may become one of my agents yourself."

In bowing, Zeben looked past the king to a small wooden stool where a young woman with an incredibly small waist was rolling her eyes to the skies. This gave him an idea that his majesty was not known for easy riddles.

Nonetheless he said, "I'll try your riddles gladly, your majesty."

The king shook a finger at him. "I wasn't giving you a choice, young man."

Zeben bowed again. "And what happens if I fail to answer correctly, your majesty?"

His majesty sniffed. "I'm asking the questions here, miscreant. Now, let me see: first riddle. Yes. What is the largest thing in the world?"

The soldiers, who had seemed a bit concerned at the idea of this young man's becoming one of the king's agents, chuckled. This riddle could be answered in many different ways, and no answer was right unless the king happened to like it.

But Zeben hardly hesitated over the problem. "Why, the world itself," he said. "Especially when you're all alone." His mind went to his parents' graves.

"Mmm, very good. A bit gloomy perhaps, but very good." The king was impressed; gloomy young men fit his own mood exactly. "Now, then: second riddle. What is the smallest thing in the world, if you're so smart?"

Zeben again had no need to step back and think this over. "Your family," he said, "when everyone in it has died but you." His mind was still on those two sorry little graves, and it came to his memory that his parents were there because of this king's miserable ways.

"To be sure, to be sure." The gloomier the answer, the more cheerful his majesty felt. "I perceive you are a philosopher, young man. Try a harder one. What is the broadest and narrowest thing in the world, both at the same time?" That ought to worry him.

It didn't "Why, the king's own hand!" Zeben announced.

The king looked the young man up and down. "Oh yes? How so?"

Zeben's chin was up. "Because when it takes, a whole village cannot fill it to his satisfaction. But when it gives, it is too narrow to hold so much as a pin."

The king's sense of humor had its limits. "Why, the boy's an idiot!"





he declared, slapping his broad and narrow hands on the arms of the throne. "If he worked for me, he'd spill the turnips and kick holes in the back door! He's of no use: take him across the border and sell him to the slavers!"

The three soldiers had stepped up behind Zeben when a voice shouted, "Stop!"

"Who's that?" snapped the king. "Who dares to give orders in my throne room?"

"The lad has answered your questions, you miserable old trout, and very well, too," announced a deep voice, deep in the shadows. "Another man could have thought of a better reward. Not but what being a slave across the border would pay better than serving you."

"Where are you?" roared the king, standing up. "Why are you hiding? Come out and be incarcerated!"

A tall, broad man stepped onto the worn red carpet. "If you'd pay for more torches, you old sinner, you'd see well enough! What would it cost you to give this young man a decent job in your service? If money means so much to you, take this!"

A bag of gold flew from the man's hands to land on the steps to the throne. Three gold coins popped from the top to jingle at his majesty's feet.

The king looked from the gold to the unannounced guest. Shaking, he started to speak but choked on the words. He tried to take a deep breath and fell forward, his face in the heavy bag of coins.

Zeben and the three soldiers rushed forward, but there was nothing any of them could do. "The king is dead," whispered the officer.

"Then the princess is queen!" shouted the two soldiers, turning to salute her.

The other people in the throne room looked from the late king to the new queen and started to shout, "All hail our queen!" They shouted very loudly, some of them to let the princess know they had been her friends all along, really, but most of them because the king had been such a tiresome tyrant that anyone could do a better job.

When they had quieted a bit, the new queen put out one hand toward Zeben. "If I am indeed ruler here, then it is my duty to fulfill my father's promise. You shall have a place on the staff of the palace. Anyone so wise should do well as my . . . chief advisor."

The court hurrahed this as well, for there was no one in the throne room who couldn't tell on which side bread was buttered. Zeben mounted the steps to stand beside the princess, but his eyes were on the crowd around him.

"Is something troubling you?" the princess inquired.

"I would like to thank those agents of your father for all their help," he told her, studying the faces in the court.

"So would I," she announced. "They should be rewarded."



"Our reward has already been more than you can give us, your majesty."

The crowd broke apart, giving three men more than enough room to walk toward the pair standing to the right and left of the former king. Zeben at once recognized the tall man who had saved him at the inn, the fat man who had warned him about the poisoned food, and the wide-shouldered man who had frightened the king so.

"Is there nothing I can give you?" he demanded. "I wouldn't be here now if it hadn't been for you."

"It was fair return for the service you rendered us," said the fat man. He was glowing just a bit.

"What service?" demanded Zeben. "When?"

The three men were definitely glowing as they moved toward the throne. "When you tidied our graves before breakfast," said the tall man from the inn. "You were troubled and in need, but you stopped to work for us and wouldn't even take the star from my stone."

Zeben frowned. "That means you're . . ."

Reaching out, the tall man punched him in the arm. "That's for the knock you put the star back with. I had a headache for hours."

Zeben was speechless. But the princess stepped forward. "Then that explains your magic, sir. Never before have I seen my father frightened by a bag of gold."

"It wasn't the gold," said the man who had tossed the bag down. "To the dishonest, to the wicked, we looked like this."

The glow faded, and the three men became three grinning skeletons. With shrieks the members of the court drew back. Even the princess slid a few feet backward. But Zeben reached forward, taking the hand of the nearest horror.

"How could I be afraid of the dead?" he demanded. "My mother and my father are dead."

"We'll take them your regards," the shortest of the skeletons said, disappearing just as the strange light around him had.

"I'm sorry we can't take any messages to your father," said the tallest skeleton to the princess. "We aren't going his direction." That skeleton vanished.

"Try to be a better ruler than your father was," suggested the last of the skeletons.

"I'll have help," said the princess. She put a hand on Zeben's shoulder. "We shall attend to the needs of the living and the dead."

And this they did, because Zeben never forgot the village he had come from. After all, his parents were still there.



# SECOND SIGHT

Jas. R. Petrin

“Well, I’ll just tell you something. That Darveen Van Hammond is one of the nicest and most fascinating ladies ever to settle here in End of Main, and if you can’t see it, then you’re blind as a sackful of bats.” Mrs. Robideau scooped up the book she’d been reading, whacked it against her knee, and slapped it down again. “I don’t know *why* you can’t see it. I don’t know why you can’t just accept people—nice people!—for what they are, instead of always being so snide and cynical. Is it because you’re a policeman? Is that the reason? Would you feel differently about her if *she* was a policeman?”

“You mean a policewoman.”

“Don’t tell me what I mean!”

“Sorry. Then the answer to your question is that I doubt it. I don’t like policemen all that much.” Police Chief Robideau bent even lower over his Sunday crossword.

“Well then, a detective—a Sherlock Holmes or something.” Mrs. Robideau opened her volume of short stories again and shook it at him—Sherlock Holmes and “The Resident Patient”—she was reading her way through them all.

“Sherlock Holmes wasn’t a real person.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course he was.”

“He never existed.”

“How can you say that!” Mrs. Robideau became even more indignant. “Listen! This is a fact. Evelyn Culver’s auntie went to

England and actually got to see his apartment! You know—221b Whatever-it-is Street. There it was. Doors, windows, you name it. And all his things laid out just like he left them. So don’t tell me the man didn’t exist. Besides, there’s thousands of books about him, he’s known all over the world. You should be so nonexistent!”

“I don’t want to argue about it. In any case I never approved of Sherlock Holmes,” the chief replied stiffly. “He used drugs. And he shot guns off in his apartment.”

“Well, if he wasn’t real, then I suppose his bullets weren’t real either, so there goes your argument—if you *had* an argument.” She snorted. “I think the truth is that you don’t like *anybody*, real or not. And if that’s what you’re telling me, you’re wasting your breath because I already knew it a long time ago.”

“I like you, dear. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it isn’t. We have no social life. We don’t go anywhere, we don’t do anything. All I seem to do is cook and clean. And that’s because all you ever want to do is work at your job, or sit here like a lump solving crossword puzzles. Admit it. You’ve become an old bore, and that’s the long and the short of it!”

“I like doing crosswords. They help my digestion.”

The telephone broke in on them, and the chief’s long reach corralled it in a smooth, well-practiced motion.

"That's another thing," Mrs. Robideau complained. "We can't even have a decent argument without that damn phone ringing and you galloping off to deal with something foolish. Sometimes I swear you got it rigged that way."

Robideau listened a moment, spoke a few words, and returned the receiver to its cradle.

"What is it this time?" Mrs. Robideau had her book open and was glaring at it so hard she could have burnt holes through it. "Did old Mrs. Hopewell lift up her dress in public again? Did Deke Hammond's Great Dane go poopsie on the mayor's lawn?"

"Nothing like that," Robideau replied gravely, setting his puzzle aside and heaving his bulk out of the chair. "It's Geraldine Kenrick. You remember my telling you she went missing a day or so ago? Now she's turned up. Out on Four Mile Road."

"Good for her. You can send someone else to lead the old gin-wagon home this time."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"She's dead."

**B**y the time the chief made his appearance, a small group of spectators was already gathering, a line of vehicles stretching along the edge of the road. Marvin Unger, his constable, arrived minutes later, and Robideau got him to move the curious well back, then sent him burrowing into the trunks of their two cars

for wooden stakes and rolls of yellow police tape to keep them there.

It was a lonely spot on the less developed side of the river. The tower of the town's water treatment plant stood about a half mile off, its dome gleaming in sunlight above the trees. Across the water was the town park. There was a cattle run somewhere close, its pungent scent drifting to their nostrils. A field of barley rustled in the breeze.

The body lay partly concealed under a scruffy hedgerow, face-down in a clump of ragweed, left elbow crooked outwards, right arm flung straight up above the head. An autopsy would of course be performed, but the cause of death was obvious from inspection. A heavy blow had killed her. Broken her skull. Crushed the bones of her temple just above the right ear.

"Nasty. Real nasty. Who'd do this to a harmless old woman?" Unger muttered at the chief's elbow. His youthful face was brooding and gray. "I'm sure they weren't after her for her money. And it couldn't of been—well—for the other thing."

"How do you know that?" Robideau turned to look at him.

"How do I know what?"

"That she didn't have money."

Unger looked relieved. "Oh, that. Well, because she moved here to End of Main not too long ago. Nobody retired would deliberately choose this town to retire to if they could afford to go elsewhere. If you got money, you

head for the city. They got all the best hospitals and specialists, and they got retirement homes there like luxury apartments. You should see the one where my mother lives. It's a regular palace. It's got—"

"Go interview the spectators, will you?" Robideau told him irritably. "Maybe we'll be lucky for a change. Maybe there's an eyewitness just itching to talk to us."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"I never do."

He sat in the toolshed, at the workbench, studying the wrecking bar. He lifted it, tried its weight, turned it over, set it down again. He had been scrutinizing it for five minutes even though he had owned it for more than twenty years. No. That wasn't right. Sloppy thinking again. He must learn to be accurate. More precisely, his mother had owned it, just as she had owned almost everything else—the house in town, the old furniture, this rickety lakeside cottage and its shed. Though as weathered as the cottage, the shed and its contents were every bit as tidy, storm windows clean and carefully tilted against one wall, garden implements hanging from hooks. Above the workbench a poster declared: FIGHT BILL C-68! SAY NO TO GUN CONTROL! He had tacked it up in mockery of the authorities. Forced registration of firearms! What nonsense. If one wished to . . . employ violence . . . one didn't need a gun. At first he'd thought

knives were the answer. But he'd found a better solution.

He hefted the bar. Let them register this!

Turning his gaze towards the window and staring through its spotless glass panes, he saw a lawn that showed signs of needing some attention again.

Mother hadn't liked it when he let the lawn get scruffy.

He had better take care of it.

Right now.

He wheeled the lawnmower out of the shed but stopped beside his motorcycle. There he paused. On second thought, he could mow the lawn later. There wasn't time now. He wouldn't get finished until sundown, and he needed to take a spin by the river before that. Learn the lay of the land. There was someone he had seen walking alone there in the late evening. Spotted her from his special lookout place. He recognized her from the lodge and had decided she was someone he ought to meet. . . .

Robideau plodded up the winding locked-brick pathway that led from visitors' parking to the Lodge West entrance. The casual glance of a passerby revealed the lodge to be a well-cared-for establishment with bright, broad, terraced flower gardens and close-trimmed lawns. For the benefit of both residents and visitors, white garden chairs stood in random groupings, and at one such grouping Robideau found Mrs. Chelty, the head administrator.



"You're late," she said crossly. "I was about to give up on you."

The chief responded with a conciliatory grin, giving his wrist-watch a gentle shake.

"I apologize. I'm running late today. This job is unpredictable. One day nothing, and the next I'm being run off my feet."

"Yes. Well, my job *is* predictable. I'm run off my feet *all* the time."

Robideau inspected the woman. He knew her as someone to nod at, though he'd never had any particular conversation with her. She was plump and stern-faced, with straight dark hair cut off sharp at her shoulders. She dressed plainly but well, looked him straight in the eye, and gave the impression of being able to run an army barracks, never mind a retirement home.

"I've set aside twenty minutes for this," she said. "I believe that ought to be enough time."

"Yes, well, I'll do my best." The chief pulled up a chair. "About Mrs. Kenrick's history. We've been called about her before. There were other times when she wandered off and got herself lost."

"That isn't surprising. It's a common thing among some of the elderly. Regardless of their dependence on others, they're free spirits in their own minds and insist on being able to come and go as they like. Perfectly correct in most cases. And understandable."

"Yes. I won't argue. But it must be a great worry all the same to

someone in charge of an establishment like this."

"That's why we have all our doors alarmed. We can't lock exits, of course, due to fire regulations, but no one goes out or in without our knowing about it. Unfortunately Mrs. Kenrick was what you might call an outpatient. She lived alone, as I'm sure you're aware. Our responsibilities towards her entailed having someone call at her house to check on her welfare. Three visits a week—Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays."

"A retirement home outpatient?"

Mrs. Chelty straightened her shoulders. "Growing old isn't a crime, Chief Robideau, and this isn't a prison. People aren't obliged to check in here at a critical age. Despite that, there is a waiting list. Those who do apply for residency have to be paneled before they're accepted—a vetting procedure that can take weeks if not months. And finally it requires money. It takes more than a Social Security check to stay here, which means virtually all of our residents have private means of some sort—company pensions, inheritances, or other personal resources. Mrs. Kenrick's daughter paid only outpatient fees, having us visit her mother to check on her health and make sure she was still functioning independently—taking her medications, keeping adequate food about the place, all that sort of thing."

"Was she a special case?"



"Not at all. We have several such clients. We haven't accepted any new ones for over a year. We just can't accommodate them."

"So when she wandered off those other times, it wasn't because your people slipped up in any way. Due to overwork, I mean."

"Certainly not." Mrs. Chelty bristled. "On those three previous occasions when we found Mrs. Kenrick missing, we reported it immediately. We telephoned you. That's how we handled it this time. We are in no way responsible, either ethically or legally."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were," Robideau said with a conciliatory look. "No, ma'am. But when somebody is killed, there are harsh questions to be answered." He got up and gazed appreciatively at the manicured grounds: sprinklers scattering water on a flowerbed; a man in a brown uniform riding a lawn tractor over the grass. "If you can tell me, Mrs. Chelty, I'd like to know who Mrs. Kenrick associated with. Did she have any close friends or acquaintances?"

"I asked her caseworker that very question. None, was the answer I got. None that we know of. Her social life was limited. She would show up here from time to time for scheduled activities—a privilege included in her outpatient fees. But she didn't mix well. She was argumentative. I'm afraid the others didn't like her much."

The chief's ears pricked up.

"Any particularly bitter conflicts?"

"No. There was nothing like that."

"I see. Well then, had anyone expressed an interest in Mrs. Kenrick lately—called here asking about her?"

"No." Mrs. Chelty inspected her visitor appraisingly through sharp eyes. "I take it you don't believe this to be a random act of violence, Chief Robideau."

"It isn't that at all. I'm simply leaving my options open." He nodded. "Thank you, Mrs. Chelty."

As he turned away, Mrs. Chelty said, as if her cooperation had earned her a briefing, "But you have no idea yet who might have killed her? You have no suspect?"

"Not yet."

She gave her head a toss.

"I'm *sure* it was random violence. There's so much of that sort of thing these days, and I don't think the police—you'll excuse me for mentioning it—take such activity seriously enough. You only respond to it when it's particularly brutal. In the best of all possible worlds a police department would nip such behavior in the bud."

"In the best of all possible worlds, Mrs. Chelty, there'd be no need for a police department."

Robideau strode off. He could stay and argue, but why bother? He wouldn't alter this woman's beliefs. He knew from experience that people's opinions about the law were not likely to be influenced by the views of a police officer.

The next call came in the following morning. He had just arrived at the office and was sitting down at his desk with coffee and a muffin. It was Unger. Another body found. Something shifted deep inside him; something worrisome and heavy. Leaving his breakfast to grow cold, he hurried out to his car and sped off with a chirp of tires. His destination was the river where an old boathouse stood on the bank. Here a mile or two of waterfront had been developed decades ago into a pleasant park. On summer nights many End of Mainers found its winding river paths an enjoyable place to stroll.

Only there hadn't been much joy in them for Mrs. Gradaker.

Unger led him to the boathouse waving his arms around. "You got to ask yourself, chief, what the heck's goin' on! Another one! And so soon! I'm really startin' to think we might have us a live one here." Under Robideau's frosty gaze he hastily corrected himself: "The killer, of course."

The body looked pitiful and small. The chief growled in disgust. As before, the attack had been brutal, the victim struck from behind, a blow fracturing the skull. With a heavy sigh, the chief straightened and peered about, trying to work out the circumstances of the crime.

This wasn't a true boathouse, the type built out over the water, but an old dirt-floored structure with a permanent lean to its timbers, unlocked and vacant. In

Robideau's day canoes had been stored here. Now neglect ruled.

Sagging doors gave onto a narrow access road that dwindled to a footpath leading down to the river. The assailant could have lurked here in darkness, peering from between broken boards until the quarry drew near. Then a lunge from the shadows, a heavy blow, and the deed was done. The body might then have been dragged into the shed, although the hard-packed earthen floor showed no marks. There was very little blood, which allowed the pathetic hope that the poor woman had died quickly and painlessly.

"Who found the body?"

"Guy heading along the river for a morning stroll. Flagged me down seconds later, actually. Jumped right out at me. Good thing he spotted it. I'd of probably driven right by. He's shook up, though. This isn't something he bargained for."

"Who is he?"

"Some kind of gardener. Looks after lawns and stuff all over town."

"All right. Where is he?"

Robideau went over to Unger's car, opened the front passenger's door and got in. He twisted sideways to make eye contact with the brooding man behind the monkey wire.

"You okay?"

The man was small, athletic-looking, and in his middle forties. He sat with his head thrown back against the seat, looking as if he wished more than anything else

that he hadn't set foot outside his door that day. Something about him seemed familiar.

"Do I know you?" The chief eyed the man curiously.

"Probably. I know you."

Great. A smart-ass. Definitely just what he needed right now.

"Your name is . . ."

"Wigner. Donald Wigner."

The chief recognized the name if not the face. There were plenty of Wigners around.

"What happened exactly?"

"Happened? How do I know? All I know is, I found a body."

"Tell me about it."

"I just did. I don't know anything else. I didn't see anything. Nothing except the body, okay, and when I did spot it, not one second later this cop car is coming towards me. I mean *this* car. The one that we're sitting in. I flagged it down, and you fellows took over. And that's all I know about it. Can I go now?"

"You can leave anytime you want, my friend, but then I'll just have to look you up again later, won't I?"

Wigner gave a wretched sigh, a man cruelly trapped.

Robideau looked out through the windshield at the gently descending riverbank, at the small tufted, weedy islands dividing the flow of the water, at the undulating path. "Pretty spot. It's hard to imagine how such things can happen in surroundings like this."

"If you can't imagine it, then I guess nobody can."

"You come here often?"

"No."

"This morning, then, was an exception?"

"I thought you wanted to talk about the dead woman."

Robideau turned curious eyes on Wigner. "Oh. So you know it's a woman?"

"Well, why wouldn't I? I found her, after all." Wigner hesitated. "I saw that right away."

"Interesting," Robideau said, "because I didn't. In fact, when I first looked inside—the way the body is lying, face away from the door like that, and the clothing, the jeans and sneakers—I had to get right inside the shed before I was certain."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes."

Wigner chewed his lip. "Well, if you think about it a minute, the light was better when I discovered her. The sun had barely risen then, and its light was angling into the shed sideways, from the east."

Robideau methodically studied the boathouse, the present depth of shadow, the slope of the sun. It made sense.

"Yes, I suppose that is true. Now maybe you won't mind telling me what you were doing here so early."

"Listen," Wigner said with curt resentment, "I was taking a stroll, all right? I spotted a body and flagged down a cop. What else do you want? There's nothing more I can tell you." Suddenly more conciliatory, he cleared his throat noisily, fanned out his hands. "Look, chief, I don't want to be

difficult. I want to be helpful. I've helped you already, for Pete's sake. But this whole thing has rattled me, and I can't think all that clearly right now."

The chief responded with a lift of his eyebrows. "As I said before, Mr. Wigner, you can go anytime. Just leave your particulars with the uniformed officer. I'll look you up later. Don't you worry about that." He got out of the car and opened the rear door for the man.

Watching Wigner stride angrily up the bank and disappear over the crest, head down, hands thrust deep into jacket pockets, the chief and Unger traded comments.

"What do you make of the guy?" Unger asked.

"What he says seems truthful enough," replied Robideau. "But all the same something bothers me. He's got something on his mind."

"That's what I thought, too. 'Course it don't mean he's our man or anything." Unger laughed wryly. "How could he be? That woman died hours ago. And where's the weapon? Still, he could of been up to something, which is why he's all nervous at dealing with us. Most likely something totally different. My guess is that he might of been planning some B&E's around here. Or he could be a peeper."

"Good grief, Unger, what on earth would he be peeping at down here by the river? Otters and bulrushes? Do you think he was planning to burglarize a beaver lodge?"

"He could of been peeping all night long, chief, for all we know. Or he could of been casing homes in the area. There's some nice ones not far from here."

Robideau grunted. "Or maybe he's just uncomfortable at spotting dead bodies on an empty stomach."

"Whatever you say, chief." The forensics van rolled up. "You sticking around? Could be they'll find something."

"I'll be at the office, or out making inquiries. Call me if there's anything earthshattering."

He was angry with himself.

In fact he was furious.

He shouldn't have gone back to the riverbank. What on earth had possessed him? He'd thought it would be easy. Nothing to it. Simply saunter by and glance in through the doors.

But the doors had swung partly shut since last night, and when he had stealthily tried to peer between them—his heart practically beating its way out through his chest—the damn police car had turned into the access road right in front of him. The lone cop occupying the car had him cold; there was no way to explain his behavior, or to pretend later, if questioned, that he hadn't seen anything. So he had had to think fast, make the first move, deliberately flag the damn cop down.

It had been bold but effective.

The cop had not seemed too suspicious. Rolling his window down, he'd gazed blankly at the

man waving furiously at him as if his mind had to be summoned from someplace miles away. Then, after poking into the boat-house, he had emerged pale and shaken. He'd begun jabbering into his radio immediately.

A few minutes later Chief Robideau had shown up. The two had put their heads together, and then the chief had climbed into the patrol car with him.

He hadn't placed Wigner at Lodge West, thank goodness. Nobody took much notice of gardeners. To most observers they were faceless creatures, a part of the landscape. Still, now that the chief knew his identity, he would soon learn Wigner's particulars. He would be very well versed in them by the time he came to speak to Wigner again.

It made things difficult.

There was still much to do.

**R**obideau sat at his desk, grim and pensive.

In a sea of uncertainty, some things were nevertheless predictable.

A third body had been found. That made three murders in as many days. It had turned this into a political case. Popular opinion ruled. With a crazed killer on the loose, a maniac who had to be stopped, the town council was demanding results. Not that a councillor's wrath troubled Robideau much; he was an old hand at fending off politicians and close enough to retirement to be practically fireproof. But the sense of urgency was an impediment.

Also, he took it personally that someone in the community would commit three homicides under his nose, and he feared for the innocent, the next senior who might be set upon.

These considerations churning in his mind, he stepped into the reception area, where Claudia Webb snapped her gum at him. "Your timing is perfect," she said, pointing at the door to the street. Pete Melynychuk was waving at him through the glass. Robideau's heart sank. Pete was an annoying old tosspot, and with him was another town character, old Wolverton, as reticent as Pete was garrulous.

Pete pushed the door open.

"Got another stiff on your hands, huh?" he hollered cheerfully, as if the chief must be tickled and pleased by the fact.

In these days of cell phones, voice mail, and scanners, it almost seemed as if the public knew what was happening before the cops did. Not that these two had a cell phone—unless they'd stolen one—but they were tuned into the town gossip like no other two citizens he knew of. The chief tried to retreat to his office, but Pete persisted.

"Hang on a minute. Old Wove wants to talk to you. He's got something to tell you, something important." Roughly he dragged Wolverton's spindly frame out from behind his own barrel body and shoved him forward like a peace offering. "Tell him, Wove."

But Wove hung back, grinning foolishly.

"I think," said Pete, "we need to go someplace. Someplace dark and comfy like, oh, I dunno, say the bar at the Interlake?" He jerked his thumb at the street, and with a sigh the chief fell in behind them.

Seated around two large pitchers of beer (courtesy of Robideau) the men exhibited good spirits. Pete Melynchuk took charge.

"All right, now, Wove, you tell the chief here what happened."

But Wolverton just sat there grinning.

"Tell him everything," Pete instructed, "just like you told me."

Wove kept grinning.

Pete cleared his throat noisily, drew his eyebrows together, and rocked forward on his elbows.

"Now listen, Wolverton, this is serious. There's some maniac going around killing folks, and the chief here has to stop him. You may be the only one can give him a line on the guy."

"What's that?" The chief was suddenly energized. "What are you telling me? Does Wolverton know something?"

"Darn tootin' he does." Pete bestowed a disgruntled glance on his gangly companion. "He was attacked last night down near the river. By some nutcase. A guy swinging an iron bar."

They now had the chief's full attention.

"The only reason Wove's not warming a slab at Prancing Al Evans's funeral home," Pete continued, "is because the dew was so thick on the grass it made him slip, lose his balance, and fall on

his butt—Wove did, I mean, not the nutcase. The nutcase missed Wove's skull by *that much*!"

Pete held up two pinched fingers. "If he'd connected, he'd be minus a murder weapon. A head like Wove's got, that bar would of bent like a barrel hoop."

The chief interrupted. "Hold on. You keep saying 'he.' Does that mean Wove got a look at the guy?" You quickly forgot that Wolverton could speak for himself; you relied on his pals to do his communicating for him.

Pete Melynchuk husked something into Wolverton's large ear, got a response, then turned back to Robideau. "He says he couldn't see much, it was too dark. He does say, though, that he definitely heard something."

"Heard something? What exactly?"

"It was just before the nutcase jumped him. There was only the frogs croaking, right, when he suddenly hears . . . what *was* it you heard, Wove?" Pete listened again. "Something like a bonk? What do you mean, a 'bonk'?" Wolverton added something that made Pete even surlier. "More like a conk? Well, make up your mind, godammit! Was it a conk or a bonk?"

The chief tugged Pete's sleeve.

"Bonk is fine. I can live with bonk. What I need to know is what happened next."

"I'm tryin', chief! I'm goin' for it! Can't you see it's like pumping sand up a well? He hears this noise—it's a bonk or a conk. Stops and looks all around him. Only

he can't see a helluva lot 'cause there ain't no moon. Only starlight is all."

"I'm listening."

"Well, that's it. That's when the nutcase swings on him."

"He must have seen something if there was starlight."

Pete seized Wolverton by the collar.

"Don't hold out on us. The chief needs the full dope!"

The chief suffered in silence. He had two full dopes here, growing fuller by the minute, and they were getting him nowhere. Wolverton muttered another mis-sive, and Pete relayed it. "It wasn't only dark but there was a mist off the water. He got *sort of* a look, but he don't like to mention it. He thinks—*thinks*, mind you—that this weren't no ordinary nutcase. It was a special nutcase. He says the eyes were all weird."

"The eyes? What about the eyes?"

"They were big, he says. Bug-like and bulging—" With a groan Robideau began getting up to leave, but Pete placed a restraining hand on his arm. "It's no gag, chief. He seen it—or thinks he did. 'Course, by that time of night he could of been into the sauce just a tad—"

"More than a tad, I think," said Robideau. He brushed past Pete and made for the exit. As the door swung shut he could hear Pete Melynchuk calling after him, "Big eyes, real shiny ones. And a big bald head, round and bulging . . ."

The Robideaus shared cinnamon coffee in the kitchen.

"Serial killings are among the most difficult crimes to solve," the chief was saying dispiritedly, "since there's so little connection between killer and victim. A man kills his wife, a wife kills her husband—there's a history there that you can dig into. But when a killer strikes at random, it's hard to know where to start."

"I guess that explains," replied Mrs. Robideau as she rattled a frying pan out of the cupboard, "why you haven't started."

"Of course I've started."

"You haven't accomplished much, sitting in the pub all day."

"I wasn't there *all* day. And I've done plenty. I've worked on nothing else since that first call came in." He was already sorry he'd mentioned Pete Melynchuk and old Wolverton.

"'Done' and 'accomplished' are two different things." She took a large Spanish onion from a bag and set it on her cutting board. "Is that coffee okay?"

"It's fine."

"And is the dryer still going downstairs?"

The chief leaned his head out into the hallway, cocked one ear, then pulled back in again.

"Yes, it's still going."

"Cook and clean, that's all I do. So, tell me. How *do* you find a serial killer?"

"Sometimes you don't."

"I thought you'd say that."

Mrs. Robideau greased the



skillet while the chief slumped at the table with a put-upon look. "I don't know if there's any particular method to it," he said. "You begin by looking for a pattern, I guess."

"Fine. And have you done that?"

"Sure. I'm doing it as we speak."

The chief sipped coffee in glum distraction. "There's a common thread to these attacks, and if it's coincidence, it's hard to accept. Think about it. All three of the victims were retirees, all three were in poor health, and all were receiving personal care from Lodge West."

"You figured that much out, did you?"

"All were killed in or near River Park, and in the same manner."

"You're sharp as an egg."

"But the most puzzling similarity is their background. Not one of them was a long-term resident here. Not one a true End of Mainer. All had moved here from other places late in life."

Mrs. Robideau finished grating the onions and scraped them into the hot pan with the side of her knife.

"People move. So what?"

"Sure they do, and for all kinds of reasons. But when they, and only they, wind up as murder victims, you got to wonder at it, that's all I'm saying. Of the retirees now residing in End of Main, more than nine out of ten are long-term locals. Lived here all their lives. I checked."

Mrs. Robideau shoved the onions around in the pan with a

spatula. "Like you said—a coincidence."

"Could be, only . . ."

"Or," she said, "there's another explanation. The killer is getting on in years himself. He's a long-time resident, too, and don't want to harm any personal old friends."

The chief raised his eyebrows.

"Interesting thought."

"You're mocking me."

"I'm not mocking you. For all I know, you're quite right." He turned in his chair to look at her. "But explain to me how it is that all three victims were associated with Lodge West—and all of them outpatients. What about that?"

"Simple. This nut attacks old people. Old people are at Lodge West. He attacks outpatients because they're the most vulnerable. To get at the folks living inside, he'd have to work there or be a resident himself. You can't just walk into the place. You told me the doors are alarmed."

"You keep saying 'he.'"

"Oh, it's a 'he,' all right."

"How do you know?"

"Because women don't whack people with iron bars."

"What do they whack them with? Frying pans?"

"Just watch it. I got a frying pan right here."

"As long as you don't have an iron bar, I'll take my chances. But seriously, you're describing an elderly male who's a longtime End of Mainer and doesn't live or work inside the care home. Which is well and good as far as it goes."

"What more do you want?"

"A motive would be nice."

"You just said yourself, there probably isn't one. Since it isn't a robbery thing, or a sex or personal thing, it could simply be some sort of psychotic hatred of women. It could be your killer is a mis . . . mis . . ."

"Misogynist?"

"That's it."

"Anything else?"

Mrs. Robideau snorted. "Isn't that enough? If you're waiting for a name and phone number, I got to disappoint you." She dumped ground beef in the pan. "For that kind of personal detail you need the second sight."

"Don't tell me . . ."

"I am telling you. I mean Darveen Van Hammond."

Robideau sighed. "I must have the second sight myself. I knew you'd drag her into this sooner or later."

"I'll arrange a consultation."

"I've no time for such nonsense."

"You're afraid of being proved wrong."

"Not at all. I just happen to think she'd be wasting my time."

Mrs. Robideau jabbed at the sputtering meat with her fork. "Oh, I see! You don't want more information. You got too much already. You're going into overload. That's why you keep staring off into space and scratching your head."

"I don't scratch my head."

"You scratch it, all right. From the inside. It kills the roots when you do that. It's why you're going bald on top."

"You're being ridiculous."

"Then explain that bald spot."

"I can't explain it."

"You can't explain very much."

You can't explain who's killing these women, and at the rate things are going, we won't have one female senior citizen left by the end of the summer. And *you* won't be here either."

"Why won't I?"

"Because the *male* seniors will have strung you up, that's why!" She turned to glare at him while saying this, and now her voice suddenly hardened. "Just look what you're doing to my floor!"

The bewildered chief looked down at his feet to find wisps of dried grass clippings littering the linoleum. Mrs. Robideau had a broom and dustpan out before he knew it. "Cook and clean! Just like I said!"

The chief rubbed his eyes. "I give up," he said. "Go ahead. Give your Ms. Van Hammond a call if it makes you happy."

Mrs. Robideau brightened.

"You mean it?"

"Sure. But I'd better not have to provide anything special for the occasion. No dead cats, blind toads, or items I don't keep in stock. I'm too busy to go shopping. Tomorrow I'm paying a visit to our 'almost' eyewitness, Mr. Wigner, who is only a witness after the fact, unfortunately, but the closest thing I've got."

"Unless you include old Wolverton!" Mrs. Robideau reminded him.

The chief rolled his eyes ceilingward.

**P**erusing the list of landscaping and gardening contracts he had obtained from the town permits clerk, the chief was startled to see the words "Lodge West" leap out at him. Startled and intrigued. It might of course be yet another coincidence that Wigner, his only suspect—if one could call him that!—had this association, however tenuous, with the victims. After all, a gardener cut lawns where he found them. And End of Main was no metropolis; it wasn't uncommon to be tripping over the same folks several times a day. On the other hand, the folks one usually tripped over were living ones, not dead ones.

Still, his anticipation grew keener as the switchboard at Lodge West buzzed him through to the maintenance yard. He was in luck. He had caught Wigner at the lodge on his way out to weed some flowerbeds or whatever was on his list that day. Wigner seemed as surprised as the chief was. He promised to remain where he was until the chief got there, but he didn't sound too enthusiastic about it.

Nor did the wait improve his spirits. He welcomed Robideau into the large steel maintenance outbuilding with cool reticence. There was a lawn tractor standing in the yard. A pickup with a small flatbed trailer behind it. A gleaming motorcycle looking out of place among the scatter of utilitarian equipment.

"Feeling better now?" the chief asked.

"Not really."

"That's too bad. We can't put this off any longer."

"I don't see why not. I don't see why we can't put it off forever. There's nothing more I can tell you. I've explained that to you."

"It's possible to know things and not realize that we know them."

Wigner looked surly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you may have noticed something important during your stroll that morning, something you've dismissed from your mind, thinking there was no connection with that woman's death." Robideau shrugged. "You may even have seen the killer."

"How?"

"You may have passed right by him on the pathway."

"That's crazy. The body was cold by that time."

The chief looked at him curiously, then said, "But this guy isn't exactly playing with a full deck, is he? He's not normal. For all we know, he may have hung around for hours after the crime and only left the area when the sun started to rise."

Wigner stared back balefully as if this were something he had not considered before. After a long pause he said, "Maybe you're right."

"You did see somebody?"

"I'm trying to remember."

He looked away, right elbow cupped in his left hand, right hand digging at the back of his neck. Then he turned back to Robideau. "Now I think of it, that's

right. There was somebody. A guy came down from the boat-house area as I was going up the path towards it."

"What did he look like?"

"Grubby-looking. Beard. Shaggy hair."

"What color hair?"

"Dark hair with gray streaks in it."

"What sort of clothing?"

"Old clothes. He was dressed like, well, a bum. One of those homeless guys. I don't know."

"Was he carrying anything?"

Wigner considered this question carefully. "I didn't see anything in his hands if that's what you mean, but he could have had something with him under the long coat that he wore."

"He wore a long coat?"

"That's right."

"When I asked you what he wore a moment ago, you didn't mention any long coat."

"I'm mentioning it now."

Robideau held Wigner's gaze until the other man looked down. "Oh well," said the chief dismissively, "it doesn't matter. He probably isn't our man anyway. As you said, the timing's wrong. The body was stiff and cold by then."

"Well, yes, it was . . ."

Robideau's piercing gaze again held him, and they stood this way for several long moments.

"Live alone, do you?" asked Robideau suddenly.

"Ah, wait," replied Wigner, unsettled by the change in direction, "I've got to think about this."

"You don't know if you live alone?"

"I don't mean about that! I mean about the other thing! The body!" He put his hands to his head. "You've got me confused."

"But you do live alone?"

"Yes!"

"The address you gave is a fair distance from the river. Hardly within walking distance. How did you get there so early in the day?"

Wigner seemed to be having trouble keeping up with Robideau's changes of subject.

"On my bike."

"That bike?" The chief faced the open door and wandered over to the gleaming motorcycle as if the murder was no longer of interest to him. "This is a Kawasaki Z1, isn't it?" He directed the question over his shoulder.

Wigner didn't respond for several moments, then said grudgingly, "You know your motorcycles."

"I took an interest in them when I was younger." The chief bent over the machine, stroking his chin. "This is an old model in-line four. Double overhead cam. Nine hundred cc block." He nodded approval. "This one's a classic."

"Yes, she is."

"Gets you about in record time, I bet."

"Oh sure. In a few minutes I can be anywhere. I can . . ." His sudden verbosity trailed off, and he stood looking at the chief with his mouth half open.

"So how did the interview go?" Mrs. Robideau asked the chief.

"Good, I think. It depends on how you look at it."

"And how *do* you look at it?"

"Well, it opened my eyes a little. I gave Mr. Wigner some line, then let him run with it. I don't believe he's telling us all he knows about his morning stroll. On the other hand I'm sure he told me things that didn't really happen at all."

The chief related the highlights of the interview, dwelling on Wigner's description of the shaggy pedestrian. The so-called homeless man. "We have our fair share of problems in this town, but homeless people are not one of them."

"We get a few," Mrs. Robideau argued. "A man like that could have been cutting through town on his way to someplace else."

"Possibly, but I don't think so. We're not exactly on a beaten track here. I think Mr. Wigner is blowing smoke at me. Besides, it's a known fact in police departments that nonexistent suspects are all too often described as dark and shaggy. Some investigators have even coined an acronym for them—DSP's." The chief frowned darkly. "I'm going to have to take a closer look at our friend Wigner."

"Cynical," said Mrs. Robideau. "It's how you are."

Darveen Van Hammond was more than pleased to help out. She showed up at the Robideaus' house for tea and dessert promptly at eight—the location of the session having been selected by Robideau, who was insistent on a private meeting. The last thing

he needed was to have it nosed about town that he was so desperate for results he was resorting to soliciting help from the lunatic fringe. After banalities and shortbread cookies they gathered about the coffee table and held hands; Darveen Van Hammond's grip soon tightened.

"Keep concentrating. I'm beginning to see something."

"What is it, dear? What is it?" Mrs. Robideau edged forward excitedly on her seat cushion, her bright eyes fixed on Darveen's contorted features.

"It's . . . very high up. I have to . . . tilt way back to see it." As if she were there in person, Darveen's head tipped sharply back.

"What is it, dear? Tell us!"

"It's something huge. Really huge. It's round and sort of squished at the top and bottom. And there are strange lights glowing on it, and—oh my God! I can't look at it!" Darveen lurched forward, dropping her chin to her collarbone.

"What happened? What happened?" squeaked Mrs. Robideau.

"I was getting a cramp in my neck."

"Oh. Is that all! Well, that's good, dear. That's good. Whew! For a moment there I thought the aliens got you."

"Who said anything about aliens?" the chief hissed, frowning at his wife, who reciprocated with a disparaging look of her own.

"Ignore him, dear. That's what I do. What do you see? What's happening now?"

"There . . . there's someone—something—coming along a grassy path. But there's so much mist in the way, I can't see too much, I . . ."

"Yes, dear? Yes?"

"I see something else—a stick, maybe. Or a heavy bar. It's just sort of hanging, swinging dead in the air."

"Who's holding it?" Robideau demanded, caught up in the ferment of the moment in spite of himself.

A spasm shook Darveen Van Hammond. "What's the matter?" Mrs. Robideau demanded.

"Oh my God!"

"What's the *matter*?"

"That face! Oh dear lord, that face!"

"Whose face?" urged the chief. "Who is it?"

Instead of responding, Darveen Van Hammond abruptly toppled forward, her face meeting the placemat with a dull *thunk!* like a meaty fist. "Good grief!" exclaimed Mrs. Robideau. "Quick! Stretch her on the sofa!"

After a liedown with a cold compress on her brow, Darveen Van Hammond was finally able to sit up and have some more dessert. She finished the shortbread cookies off, in fact. But she would add nothing more to her insights, only shaking her head each time either of them tried to press her on it. Finally, despairing of details, the Robideaus drove her home.

They returned silently, lost in private thoughts. Once inside the house again, Mrs. Robideau

said, "Whew! What an experience! What did you think of Darveen's visions?"

"What can I think of them? She described someone—something, I should say—with big eyes, a narrow face, a pointed chin, and a balding head."

"So?"

"So I got a similar description from Pete and Wolverton, didn't I?"

"Well, there you go, then."

"The only trouble is that Wolverton, a so-called actual eyewitness, was three sheets to the wind at the time, and his fanciful description has gotten around town some since I last saw him in the pub pouring beer down his gullet."

Robideau cast about irritably for his crossword.

"I know where it comes from. TV shows and tabloids. It's the description those crackpots give, the ones who claim they've been spirited aboard galactic spacecraft for chitchats and medical examinations. And that business about something big and round in the sky with glowing lights!" He snorted derisively. "I can't take it seriously. There's just no way. It's all fantasy and nothing more."

"Fantasy! That's a fine thing to say! Didn't you hear Darveen tell us she's been consulted by police departments all over the country?"

"I heard *her* say it, yes."

"Well, why shouldn't she be proud of it?" Mrs. Robideau harumphed in disgust. "I might of

known you'd pooh-pooh the thing. It's just like you. So perfectly typical. *Some* policemen took her seriously, and I'll bet they didn't regret it afterwards, either!" She glared hotly at Robideau. "What the heck are you smirking at?"

"Nothing, dear."

"Come on, let's have it!"

"I'm thinking about your profile. The one you carefully and methodically composed for me yesterday. A local male, you said. An aging misogynist."

"I can admit I'm wrong. Unlike some other party I know off!"

**T**he directive on the answering machine was short and simple. Be at the Grosvenor Block precisely at ten P.M. Come alone. Bring money. Do these things faithfully, and the killer's identity would be revealed.

The voice was distorted and muffled, as if disguised by speaking through a cloth. The "bring money" instruction was rather puzzling. How much money? The amount wasn't spelled out. It was like an afterthought, as if money wasn't the true motive behind the message.

Well, it was academic in any case. There was no money. The chief didn't have any.

But that wouldn't prevent him from attending the rendezvous.

The Grosvenor was an aging structure, one of the old cracked brick Main Street edifices that dated back to the 1920's. Serving as a seniors' home for decades, it was abandoned now, boarded up,

made redundant by Lodge West. The chief went around to the back, ducked under the iron fire escape, and found one of the plywood sheets jimmied partially off.

He checked his watch. It was ten o'clock. He took his four inch flashlight from his jacket pocket, pulled back the wooden flap, and squeezed inside. Scarcely had the panel snapped shut at his heels when something alerted him. What was it? A creak of leather? A rat or a bat?

His probing light revealed little. Crumbling plaster. A gutted and empty hallway. A littered staircase. On the steps were wisps of something that he first took for clumps of dust but that on closer inspection proved to be grass clippings.

He cautiously ascended the steps. On the second floor he found he could go no higher; the third and final flight had been walled off. He aimed his flashlight downward to search for markings in the dust.

Attempting to reconstruct later what happened then was not easy. A movement spotted out of the corner of his eye. He recalled instinctively throwing himself back as something whizzed past his skull. The next moment he was flat on the floor.

Footsteps pelted off down the stairs; the wooden flap screeched open and crashed shut. He cursed himself. His attacker was escaping. He pulled himself to his feet and clumped down the stairs, bursting out through the flap in-



to the orange glow of the street-lamps.

There was no one in sight.

But a hard-pressed engine was racing away, snarling through gear after gear, and fading. A motorcycle. He stumbled back to his car.

“I’m going to get this guy, dear.” He fumbled in his pocket and drew out the pinch of grass clippings he had found on the stairs.

Mrs. Robideau wrinkled her nose. “More clippings? Where the heck are they coming from?”

“From a lawn, dear. Or from several lawns.”

“You’re mocking me again. You know what I mean. What I mean is, what good will they do you? Grass is grass. And they can’t possibly have fingerprints on them.”

“You’re right. That’s not possible. But I’m hoping that somehow they’ll lead me to an iron bar that *does* have fingerprints on it, and hopefully trace samples of some other incriminating evidence. All I have to do is find the thing, and I’m certain now that I know where to look for it.”

“You think you’ve figured out who the murderer is?”

“I’ve always known. I just didn’t *know* that I knew. My problem has been proving it, and I’m going to change that situation soon.”

“What about Darveen’s vision?”

“What about it?”

“Did it help you?”

“I can’t believe I’m admitting

this,” he said, “but I’m pretty sure now that what she told us was right on the money.”

Mrs. Robideau’s face lit up.

The chief got out of his car, pushed open the white picket gate, and went up the long narrow walk to the door of the little house. What he was about to do was completely illegal, of course, but he was prepared to risk it on the chance that prompt action might save a life. He knocked at the door as a matter of form, then tried the latch. Locked. But he was ready for that.

He dragged out the huge knot of keys and picks he had collected over the years and, after some jimmying, had the door standing open.

“Hello?” No answer. It was a workday for the occupant. Still, one couldn’t be sure. He could be lurking about the place, iron bar at the ready, waiting to flatten someone.

The chief stepped in cautiously.

The first thing he noted was that the house was remarkably tidy. The furnishings were cheap and mismatched, but everything was dustfree and polished and meticulously arranged. The chief even thought he caught the lingering scent of air freshener in the room.

He entered the kitchen, which was just as scrupulously neat. For no reason other than curiosity he opened cupboards, one after another. Then the kitchen drawers. Nothing here. The con-

tents of one drawer, however, made him shiver. It was brimming with knives. Long murderous-looking carving knives, serrated bread knives, steak knives—more knives than anyone could reasonably use in a lifetime. Still, this murderer didn't use knives to commit his offenses. This murderer liked to strike from a distance.

He looked in the bedroom. It was as faded and neat as a cheap motel room. Nothing in the closet, nothing under the bed.

Next, the basement.

His anticipation grew keener.

The basement stairs were next to the back door vestibule. The light switch was on the wall. There was a small landing with a neatly placed pair of workboots, then rough wooden steps falling away at a steep angle. He descended to the landing, picked up the boots—awkwardly, using just his fingertips—and peered at the soles. They were wonderfully clean. Improbably clean. He replaced them exactly where he'd found them and continued on down the stairs.

It was a half-basement only. Low ceiling, wooden walls. A floor of loosely laid wooden planks. But all the same scrupulously clean. No spiderwebs here. No dust-devils, no trash.

But neither was there a workbench with the usual array of tools, and realizing this, Robideau's hopes began to fade. He wanted the murder weapon, and a tidy man with a tidy house would store an iron bar where an

iron bar belonged. Here in the basement. But there were no tools to be seen. None at all. Unless . . .

Robideau had noticed that one of the wall panels seemed to jut outwards slightly. He pulled on it with his fingernails—and it swung open. Anticipation! A secret room! A string operated an overhead bulb, and he gave it a tug, then stood there blinking, uncertain what to make of what he saw before him in the glow.

It wasn't a workshop but a second bedroom. A very different sort of bedroom. Unlike the unadorned, almost severe male bedroom upstairs, this was clearly the room of a female person. There were several outfits laid out on the bed, a housecoat, a dress, the garments of an older woman. But who *was* she?

The chief went through everything but could find nothing to give him an inkling of the identity of this mystery lady living in Wigner's basement. He shut off the lights and went back up to the kitchen. Far from solving his problems, he had complicated them. He had more questions now than when he'd arrived. Irritated, he picked up the phone.

"You're sure they're women's clothes?" Mrs. Robideau asked.

"Of course I'm sure."

"I'm only asking because with all the unisex nowadays you sometimes can't tell the difference between real men and women, never mind their clothing."

"They're women's clothes. Take my word for it."

"Hmm." He could imagine her mulling it over at the other end of the line. "Well then, that is strange. There's no Mrs. Wigner. I know that for a fact."

"Was there *ever* a Mrs. Wigner? I mean, if he was married at one time and she walked out on him, or passed away, that could explain it. In those cases men sometimes keep things for years. It's not unheard of."

"I'm telling you. There isn't and never was a Mrs. Wigner!"

"They're for an older woman. His mother, or an aunt?"

"No mother, no aunt. He was an orphan, raised in foster homes all his life. I think what you got there, the secret room and all, is a cross-dresser." She changed the subject. "Did you find the murder weapon?"

"No."

"What about grass clippings?"

"Didn't find any."

"In a gardener's house? That's hard to believe."

"This guy is a neat freak."

"Where did you look?"

The chief recounted his searches. Yes, he'd looked under the beds! Yes, he'd even looked in the attic crawl space! He explained his explorations in detail, restating the suspect's compulsive tidiness.

"Did you check his trouser cuffs?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Why not?"

"Because his clothes are all freshly laundered. What would be the point?"

"I just washed *your* trousers. You put them clean on this morn-

ing. Why don't you have a look in the cuffs?"

With a sigh the chief stooped, turned out one of his trouser cuffs and watched a few wads of lint tumble out. "I'm a tidy person, too," said Mrs. Robideau, "as you darn well ought to know. But the day I start cleaning the lint out of your trouser cuffs, you can haul me off to the knackers in a beet wagon. And what's more, I'll bet your neat-freak murder suspect doesn't clean his out either."

The chief looked at his watch. It was almost five. He had only a few more precious minutes. He said his goodbyes quickly and hung up the phone.

Chief Robideau waited in his car, parked discreetly halfway up the block. Wigner had come home hours ago and since that time hadn't put his nose out the door. Had he found some sign of intrusion? The chief hoped not, and with satisfaction rubbed thumb and forefinger together, rolling the dried grass blades between them. He wondered if it was possible to match dried grass blades, perhaps by comparing the cut, ragged ends? He had no idea. But he was happy to have them. They were all he had.

The streetlights came on. It would be full dark in half an hour.

"Come on," the chief muttered. "You've barely missed a night up till now. I know you're itching for some activity. Come on out, and go collect your toy."

Then he tensed. Wigner had appeared. He locked his door, went

out to the road, and got on his motorcycle. Robideau winced. All day on a garden tractor and then straddling a motorcycle! This guy had a rump as tough as cowhide. As the bike rumbled off, the chief eased away from the curb, maintaining a generous distance.

Wigner headed out of town, which immediately presented a problem. It was far more difficult to remain unobtrusive here in quiet rural surroundings; the chief had to depend on the failing light. When Wigner turned off the blacktop and disappeared down a gravel road, trailing a dust plume, the chief decided not to follow and instead swept on by. He knew where the road went. It ended near the lakeside at a small group of aging cottages. There was no other road out. He had simply to wait.

He slowed, made a U-turn, and stopped on the shoulder a half mile up the road with his lights out. Sure enough, minutes later Wigner reappeared, his headlight bobbing as he jounced back up onto the blacktop, and his taillight following him back towards town.

Inside the town limits, Wigner led the chief on a meandering tour, wending his way through streets, avenues, and alleys. Finally, as the last glow of twilight faded, Wigner put on a sudden burst of speed and darted into a treed lane that dropped down to the river. Cautiously Robideau followed. At the end of the lane he stopped.

Here was Wigner's motorcycle, leaning on its stand, ticking as it cooled. But where was Wigner?

This was the north side of the river, opposite the park. Robideau could see the lamps of the park footpaths glowing like beadwork across the water. This side of the riverbank was undeveloped, though. The only manmade thing here within walking distance was the water treatment plant, its tower rearing into the air like a gigantic mushroom. The chief walked toward it. His quarry could be nowhere else.

A bright yard light at the foot of the tower revealed a patch of lawn that was remarkably close-cropped. No doubt another contract of Wigner's. But the chief's attention was drawn to the tower itself.

Its padlocked door stood open. Robideau stepped inside.

And was immediately made welcome.

"Come on up, chief!"

Wigner's voice.

It came booming down the stairwell at him, a reverberating echo followed by the *tang, tang, tang* of retreating leather soles on expanded metal steps.

It was a brutal climb. The chief wasn't in shape for it. Partway up he thought he felt a coronary coming on. But at length he reached the final landing. Here an enormous round pool of water spread before him spanned by a catwalk radiating outwards in four steel spokes. Between the ends of the spokes, at the outer edge of the chamber, a narrow ledge followed the curve of the wall. Wigner stood on this ledge staring at the chief in subdued fury.

"Did you know I was following you?" Robideau asked.

"No. But I'm glad you did. I was wracking my brain thinking of ways to get you to come here. Alone."

"You guessed it would be difficult after our Grosvenor Block meeting, I suppose."

No response to this.

"Well, here I am. Do you want to tell me what really happened at the boathouse that night? And maybe comment on a few other incidents as well?"

"I thought you'd already made up your mind about that."

"I have. But I'd like your version of it. The truth this time."

"I could give you the same answer. That I have nothing more to say."

"Then I'd have to say you're still lying to me, and I can tell you now that lies won't do you any good." The chief took a deep breath. "We have the grass clippings, you see."

Wigner glared. "What grass clippings?"

"The ones I found near the body in the boathouse, at the other murder scenes, and on the back floormats of our police car. They match perfectly with clippings I found in the cuffs of your pants. That's right," he said, noticing Wigner stiffen, "I searched your house. They're a perfect match. I can show you the lab report."

Robideau held his breath. He couldn't show any such thing. If Wigner called him on it, he couldn't deliver, and if the bar was as clean as everything else the man owned, he would have no case.

Wigner stood on the narrow ledge with the apparent confidence of a trapeze artist. He gazed back at the chief practically forever, it seemed. At length he said, "You think you're smart, don't you?"

"Not really. My wife is the smart one. She can outsmart me any day of the week."

The water looked cool and inviting in the trapped heat of the chamber. Not a ripple disturbed its tranquil surface; its blackness hinted somberly of cold depths. But the pool was a trap. There was no way out of it. The individual who took a plunge here might never enjoy a cooling dip ever again.

The calm face of the water reflected the overhead bulbs perfectly and also mirrored Wigner, his slight figure raffish and pirate-like, the bar thrust through his belt like a sword.

"Now," said Robideau, going for broke, "suppose you tell me. Why did you kill those people?"

Wigner's finger wagged. "Not so fast." Robideau bit his lip. Had he gambled and lost? Wigner said, "You're forgetting something, chief. You're supposed to tell me I have the right to remain silent." He shrugged as if he were above such nitpicking. "But since you've got me cold, I don't mind telling you. I had a very good reason for what I did. I did it to avenge my mother."

The chief let a thankful breath slide out. Aloud he said. "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly serious. After what's happened, don't you think I'm serious, chief?"

Wigner's voice sounded other-worldly in the echoing vault.

"She died, and here's the tragedy of it. She needed to get into the lodge, but she never made it. And do you know why? Because they stuck her at the end of a waiting list." A note of sadness softened his voice. "She didn't argue with them. That wasn't her way. She took their word for it, and—and so she died!" He was suddenly angry, practically shouting. "Rich people come here where they don't belong, where they have no right to be, and take over our medical resources! Beds, equipment, expertise, everything. They horn in, and when somebody who's lived here all of their life needs help, they're told to wait. It's criminal!"

The chief spoke in a gentle voice. Calm and reasonable.

"There's a flaw in your argument. Your victims weren't rich. Not one of them was rich. Those with money were residents and lived inside the lodge where you couldn't get at them. Therefore you took out your frustrations on outpatients, people without money who were just scraping by."

Wigner's lip curled, as if he didn't want to hear the facts.

"Those people didn't belong here! They should've gone back to wherever they came from!"

"It's a free country," the chief reminded him. "People can live where they like."

"But it's all wrong!"

"I can't comment on that. All I know is, it's you who have broken the law, Mr. Wigner. The most serious law we have."

"So come and arrest me then."

"I'm going to do that."

"How?" Wigner grinned fiendishly. "It could be a problem. You'll have to come out here on this ledge to get me. And if you try it, I just may give you a little head tap, like I gave the others. By the time they find you, I'll be miles away."

Again his mood changed. Now he was petulant.

"I knew this would happen. I knew you'd come after me sooner or later. First my mother gets mistreated, and now it's my turn. If that's what society has to offer, Chief Robideau, you can keep it. I'd rather not be a part of it."

Was the man talking suicide? If that were so, Robideau didn't dare leave him alone. He couldn't go back downstairs and radio for help, he had to stay where he was and try to talk Wigner out of it. There was no other choice. If Wigner went into the water, he was finished. The chief couldn't rescue him. There was four feet of vertical tank wall between the water's surface and the ledge, and there was no way in the world he could haul himself that far out of the water, never mind with a drowning man under one arm.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to kill one of two people. You or myself. What do you think of that?"

It occurred to the chief that he was standing between Wigner and the only door out of the place. If he moved to the side of the tank, it would give Wigner an av-

enue of escape, a chance to work his way back to the catwalk and run down the stairs.

If that happened, the chief was confident Wigner wouldn't get far. He was not an accomplished run-away. He would be picked up within hours. In any case, the chief had to risk it.

"I'm coming to arrest you now," Chief Robideau told him. He walked slowly down the catwalk to his right, and at the end he clambered over the railing and stood gingerly on the ledge.

"Don't come near me!" Wigner hollered, clenching his hand on the bar. "I'll kill you if you do! I mean it!"

Robideau displayed his most accommodating smile.

"I'll just have to hope you're not successful, then, won't I."

The ledge was narrow, a full inch shorter than his shoes. Letting go of the ironwork, the chief began sliding along, his back pressed tightly to the curve of the wall, its gritty dampness sending shivers down his spine each time he moved against it.

Wigner watched his progress, then uttered a miserable laugh.

"You know," he said—it was almost a sob. "I just can't understand this."

"What don't you understand?"

"How come I'm the bad guy in all of this."

"You don't think killing people has something to do with it?"

"I was forced into that. I'm a victim here, same as my mother was. Her and me are both victims."

Let him talk. The distance between them was closing.

"You don't have a mother."

"I know that. She died."

"I mean, you were only imagining that she lived with you."

"She died, and I wound up getting blamed for everything. It's not fair."

"Your victims weren't treated fairly, either."

"I don't care about them."

"You've made that pretty clear."

*"They got what they deserved! They had no right to be here! They should have thought of what they were doing before they moved into our town!"*

Robideau had closed the distance between them by half, and still Wigner had made no move to escape or to slip the wrecking bar from his belt. It was something, that bar. A real beaut. Easy to see how it had knocked the life out of three people with a single blow.

"Did they pay taxes here all their lives like my mother?" Wigner complained. "No. Did they help build this community a hundred other ways, helping out, volunteering like my mother did? No."

"Your mother volunteered for things?" Only a few yards separated them now. And still the bar hung at Wigner's belt.

"Sure she did. She volunteered for lots of things."

"Such as what?"

"Such as lots of things."

"Give me a for-instance."

"I don't have to," retorted Wigner. Then he suddenly scowled. "That's far enough. Don't you come one step closer."



"I have to come closer," Robideau told him. "How else can I arrest you."

"I told you to keep back!"

The chief was in striking distance now. Wigner's foot lashed out, a careless blow, aimed at the chief's leg. The chief realized that he had indeed been very foolish to clamber out here. His strategy had not worked. Wigner had not budged. And if either of them fell into the water, that would be it. He steeled himself as Wigner drew the long iron bar from his belt. "You can't hit me," the chief said on impulse. "I'm a police officer. Your mother wouldn't like you hitting a police officer, would she?"

The expression on Wigner's face—hesitation, doubt—told him that perhaps he'd finally struck a resonance within the man.

"Those *were* rich people I killed," he said emphatically.

"No, sir. I'm afraid not."

"I'll jump if you come any closer." Wigner looked close to tears.

"You mustn't do that," Robideau cautioned him. "I won't be able to rescue you." Who could tell? Perhaps the man had the wild idea that he could attempt something theatrical and still be rescued. It was important to relieve him of that misapprehension.

"Come with me. It's over. We'll go back down those stairs to my car, drive to my office, and you can tell me your side of things from the beginning. It's what you want, I think. It's what your mother would want, isn't it?"

No answer.

Wigner slowly swung the bar back and forth in his two hands. Tears streamed down his face.

"Well, isn't it?"

The chief extended his hand.

For a few long drawn-out seconds, Wigner looked at the police chief's hand. For those seconds it even seemed as if the tormented man would actually reach out for help, but that didn't happen.

Instead, Wigner lashed out with the bar viciously, broadside, striking the chief on the shoulder and driving him back against the wall. The next instant Wigner went into the water. Stepped off the ledge as if he were setting out for a stroll and dropped straight down, meeting the surface feet first as if he had practiced the move. Appalled, crippled with pain, the chief could do nothing but watch.

Wigner did not bob up again after he went under but continued to sink, eyes staring back at Robideau, mouth stretched wide in a warped, silent grimace, as slowly and inexorably, his body rotating lazily, the weight of the weapon in his fist dragged him down.

"Get rid of that thing!" Robideau hollered futilely.

But Wigner held tight. He sank out of sight into the deep with his eyes staring pleadingly at Robideau.

The next few hours were a pain-filled blur. The doctor telling the chief reassuringly that nothing was broken, a nurse clapping a nitrous oxide breather to his face as another helpful soul began

to lever away at his dislocated arm. The situation seemed rather remote and humorous to him under the effects of the laughing gas. At some point they took the gas canister away from him, and Mrs. Robideau was allowed to drive him home. She eyed his natty blue canvas sling critically every few minutes.

"A dislocated shoulder! I don't know what good that will do you!"

"No good at all, I suppose."

"It's the bad guy that's supposed to be the one-armed man," she chided. "How long will that sling stay on?"

"A few weeks, I'm told."

"You'll have to put your work aside."

"I'll manage."

"The doctor said to give it a rest."

"He meant the arm, I think. Not my work."

"I don't see there's a whole lot of difference. That's the arm you drink coffee with all day long, isn't it?"

“I’ll tell you one thing for sure,” Mrs. Robideau said as she set the coffee tray down, “I’m going to be boiling our water for the next eight weeks. A body in the water supply. Gah! Blah!”

She gave an involuntary shudder as if a ghost had walked over her grave.

"He wasn't there long," the chief reassured her, "and I don't think that Wigner had anything catching." He slipped the Velcro fastener on his sling and resettled his

arm more comfortably. "What he suffered from was an odd paranoid disorder. One in which an imaginary friend—his mother—took the abuse instead of him."

"What do you mean imaginary? We all have, or had, a mother."

"You know what I mean. He never knew his. He grew up without her. He lived alone in that house for twenty years, convincing himself that she lived there with him."

"My, you sound learned. You know all about it, do you? You're a psychiatrist among your other accomplishments." Mrs. Robideau shot him a questioning, sideways glance with her rebuke. "What did you mean yesterday when you said Darveen's vision was right on the money?"

"Wigner got about on a motorcycle and he wore a helmet. He kept the helmet on to preserve his anonymity, and it was the helmet that she was describing."

"But she didn't see that? I mean, in her mind?"

"I don't know what she saw in her mind. But that's the same story Wolverton was mumbling about in the pub. I don't know where she got the description of the water tower—a night view of it, with aircraft clearance bulbs lighting it up. Maybe that was an added footnote thrown in by Pete Melynychuk."

"You'll do anything to snub Darveen." Mrs. Robideau set her book down. This time she was into "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist." "And you still haven't explained why that man went around killing people."

"I'm not sure I know why he did it. But it may have been this. He built up his delusion about his mother over many years, then at some point took a second look at it and discovered that he couldn't sustain it any longer. But he couldn't just forget it, either. It was too deeply ingrained in him for that. So he did what the TV soaps do—wrote her out of the script. Arranged for her to 'die.' But as in any soap opera, if she died there had to be a good explanation for it. His own nitpicking temperament demanded that. He had observed the seniors at the lodge, listened to the gossip about them from the rest of the staff. A remark was made about the overcrowding, and bingo! He had his reason."

"I'm not convinced. He didn't have to kill folks. He could of simply gone around complaining for the rest of his life—like you do."

The chief ignored the barb.

"He might have done that. Only at a critical moment he met Geraldine Kenrick, who had a personality disorder of her own. She might have flagged him down that day, and if she did, she wouldn't have been too polite about it. She was never pleasant at the best of times, and here she was, lost, asking for help. So she started in on him, a man who was trying to convince himself that folks like her were the cause of his problems."

The chief tapped his palm idly with the end of his pen. "He had the bar with him—bringing it from his cottage for some reason,

or taking it back there, we'll never know which. He listened to her carping, and something inside him snapped. Afterwards he decided that he had gotten something out of killing her—a heightened sense that his fantasy was real. After that the others were easy. He'd been sneaking up into the water tower for some time, no doubt because it allowed him to look down on the world, and now it provided him with a bonus. It was the ideal place from which to select his victims."

"Easy! Did I hear you say easy?"

"What I'm saying is, if you consider his background and his paranoia, the logic of it follows. It seems rational even to me."

She stared at him, horrified.

"You're kidding me!"

"I'm saying that *from his point of view* it seemed rational."

"He killed people! What's so rational?"

Awkwardly with his left hand Robideau set his pen aside. He had a point to make. "Look at your own conviction, dear. That Sherlock Holmes was a real person."

"He is! I mean he *was*!"

With a sigh, the chief took from the endtable a book that he had previously placed there, *Great Nineteenth Century Authors*, already opened to the appropriate page. He passed it to her.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Just read. Starting at the top there. The bit on the left."

She read as directed. "I don't get it. It says here, 'Sherrinford Holmes was created by Arthur

Conan Doyle, who renamed his hero 'Sherlock' prior to the detective's first appearance in print.' "She frowned up at him. "*Sherrinford?*"

She snapped the book shut, looking baffled and cross. "Then how did Evelyn Culver's auntie visit his actual house, that's what I want to know!"

The chief clucked his tongue. "As a boy I saw Santa's workshop in a city department store. So what? My point is he truly believed his mother was real, and was able to convince himself that she had been victimized. So it was also quite logical for him to act on those beliefs."

She sniffed. "Acting's one thing. Murder is another." Grooves of perplexity lined her brow. "You know, I never thought about it till

you mentioned it, but how *did* Sherlock Holmes die?"

"He fell off a mountain or something."

"No, no. He came back after that. He had to. To solve "The Adventure of the Empty House."

Robideau was tired. He closed his eyes and massaged them wearily.

"All I'm saying is that when *any* person becomes completely convinced of a thing it can be almost impossible to change their mind on the subject."

"I'm sure that can't be true," said Mrs. Robideau, pursing her lips, reaching for the telephone. "But I have an idea. I'll phone Evelyn Culver. Her aunt must know how Sherlock Holmes died. She visited the man's house, after all . . ."

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

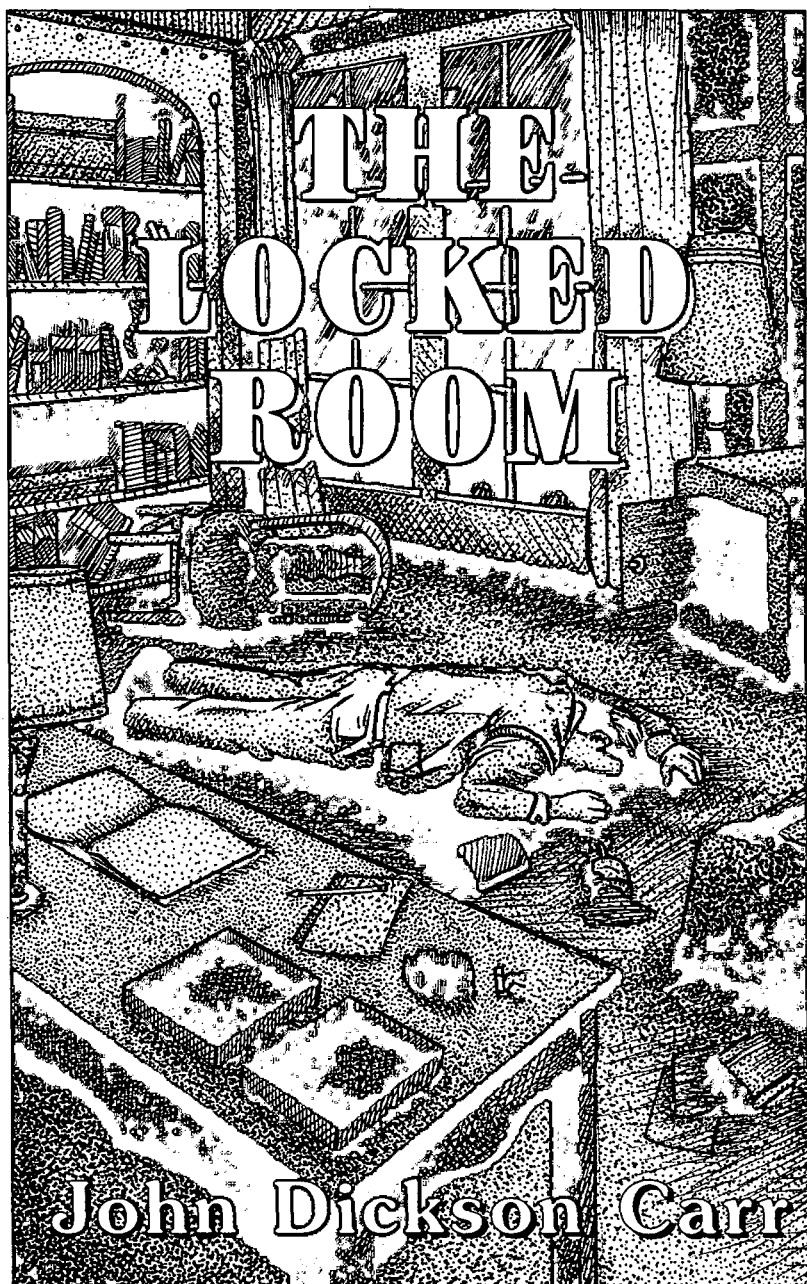


Illustration by Matt Reed

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/99

**Y**ou may have read the facts. Francis Seton was found lying on the floor behind his desk, near death from a fractured skull. He had been struck three times across the back of the head with a piece of lead-loaded broomhandle. His safe had been robbed. His body was found by his secretary-typist, Iris Lane, and his librarian, Harold Mills, who were, in the polite newspaper phrase, "being questioned."

So far, it seems commonplace. Nothing in that account shows why Superintendent Hadley of the C.I.D. nearly went mad, or why ten o'clock of a fine June morning found him punching at the doorbell of Dr. Gideon Fell's house in Chelsea.

Summer touched the old houses with grace. There was a smoky sparkle on the river, and on the flower-veined green of the Embankment gardens. Upstairs, in the library, with its long windows, Superintendent Hadley found the learned doctor smoking a cigar and reading a magazine.

Dr. Fell's bulk overflowed from a chair nearly large enough to accommodate him. A chuckle animated his several chins, and ran down over the ridges of his waistcoat. He peered up at Hadley over his eyeglasses; his cheeks shone, pinkly transparent, with warmth of welcome. But at Hadley's first words a disconsolate expression drew down the corners of his mustache.

"Seton's conscious," said Hadley. "I've just been talking to him."

Dr. Fell grunted. Reluctantly he put aside the magazine. "Ah," he said. "And Seton denies the story told by the secretary and the librarian?"

"No. He confirms it."

"In every detail?"

"In every detail."

Dr. Fell puffed out his cheeks. He also took several violent puffs at the cigar, staring at it in a somewhat cross-eyed fashion. His big voice was subdued. "Do you know, Hadley," he muttered, "I rather expected that."

"I didn't," snapped Hadley. "I didn't; and I don't. But that's why I'm here. You must have some theory about this impossible burglar who nearly bashed a man's head off and then disappeared like smoke. My forthright theory is that Iris Lane and Harold Mills are lying. If . . . hullo!"

Standing by the window, he broke off and glanced down into the street. His gesture was so urgent that Dr. Fell, with much labor, hoisted himself up wheezily from the chair and lumbered over to the window.

Clear in the strong sunshine, a girl in a white frock was standing



on the opposite pavement, by the railings, and peering up at the window. As Dr. Fell threw back the curtains, she looked straight into their eyes.

She was what is called an outdoor girl, with a sturdy and well-shaped body and a square but very attractive face. Her dark brown hair hung in a long bob. She had light hazel eyes in a tanned, earnest face. Her mouth might have been too broad, but she showed fine teeth when she laughed. If she was not exactly pretty, health and vigor gave her a strong attractiveness which was better than that.

"Iris Lane," said Hadley ventriloquially.

Dr. Fell, in an absent-minded way, was startled. He would have expected Francis Seton's typist to be either prim or mousy.

When she saw the two men at the window, Iris Lane's expressive face showed many things. Disappointment, surprise, even fear. Her knee moved as though she were about to stamp angrily on the pavement. For a second they thought she would turn and hurry away. Then she seemed to come to a decision. She almost ran across the street towards the house.

"Now what do you suppose—?" Hadley was speculating when the doctor cut him short.

"She wants to see me, confound you," he roared. "Or she did want to see me, until you nearly scared her off."

And the girl herself confirmed it a moment later. She was making an attempt to be calm and even jaunty, but her eyes always moved back to Hadley.

"It seems," she said, after a quick look round the room, "that I'm always trailing the superintendent. Or he's always trailing me. I don't know which."

Hadley nodded. He was noncommittal. "It does seem like that, Miss Lane. Anything in particular on your mind now?"

"Yes. I—I wanted to talk to Dr. Fell. Alone."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because it's my last hope," answered the girl, raising her head. "Because they say nobody, not even a stray dog, is ever turned away from here."

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Fell, hugely delighted nevertheless. He covered this with deprecating noises which shook the chandelier and an offer of refreshment. Hadley saw that the old man was half hooked already, and Hadley despaired.

Yet it seemed impossible to doubt this girl's sincerity. She sat bolt upright in the chair, opening and shutting the catch of a white handbag. "It's quite simple," she explained, and hunched her shoulders. "Harold Mills and I were alone in the house with Mr. Seton. There was nearly three thousand pounds in the safe in his study."



Dr. Fell frowned. "So? As much money as that?"

"Mr. Seton was leaving," said Iris Lane with an effort. "He was going abroad, to spend a year in California. He always made his decisions suddenly—just like that." She snapped her fingers. "We didn't know anything about it, Harold and I, until he broke the news that morning. The man from the bank brought the money round; Mr. Seton put it into the safe, and told us why he had sent for it. That meant we were out of our jobs."

And she began to tell the story.

Of course (Iris admitted to herself) her nerves had been on edge that night. It was caused partly by losing a good job at a moment's notice, partly by the thick and thundery weather round the old house in Kensington, and partly by the personality of Francis Seton himself.

Francis Seton was a book collector. When Iris had first answered his advertisement for a secretary-typist, she had expected to find someone thin and ancient, with double-lensed spectacles. Instead she found a thickset bull of a man with sandy hair and a blue guileless eye. His energy was prodigious. He animated the old house like a humming-top. He had the genuine collector's passion; he was generous, and considerate when it did not inconvenience him.

But he whirled off at a new tangent that morning, a hot overcast day, when he called Iris Lane and Harold Mills into his study. They had been working in the long library on the first floor. The study, which opened out of it, was a large room with two windows overlooking a tangled back garden.

Seton stood by the big flat-topped desk in the middle of the study. Out of a canvas bag he was emptying thick packets of banknotes, one of which fell into the wastepaper basket.

"Look here," he said, with the confiding candor of a child, "I'm off to America. For a year at least."

(He seemed pleased at the way his hearers jumped.)

"But, sir—" began Harold Mills.

"Crisis!" said Seton, pointing to a newspaper. "Crisis!" he added, pointing to another. "I'm sick of crises. California's the place for me. Orange groves and sea breezes: at least, that's what the booklets say. Besides, I want to make old Isaacson sick with my 1593 *Venus and Adonis* and the 1623 folio."

His forehead grew lowering and embarrassed.

"I've got to let you both go," he growled. "I'd like to take you both with me. Can't afford it. Sorry, but there it is. I'll give you a month's salary in place of notice. How's that?"

Beaming with relief now that this was off his chest, he dismissed the subject briskly. He gathered up the packets of banknotes, fishing

the dropped one out of the wastepaper basket. It made his face crimson to bend over, since Dr. Woodhall had warned him about high blood pressure, but he was all energy again.

A little iron safe stood against one wall. Seton opened it with his key, poured the money into a tin box, closed the safe, and locked it. In a vague way Iris noted the denominations on the paper bands round the packets of notes: £1, £5, £10, £100. A little treasure trove. Almost a little fortune.

Perhaps because of the heat of the day, there was perspiration on Harold Mills' forehead. "And when do you leave, sir?" he asked.

"Leave? Oh, ah." Seton considered. "Day after tomorrow," he decided.

"Day after tomorrow?"

"Saturday," Seton explained. "Always a good ship leaving. Yes, make it Saturday."

"But your passport—" protested Iris.

"That's completely in order," said Seton coolly.

The word which flashed through Iris Lane's mind just then was "robbed." She could not help it. There are times with everyone when the sight of so much money, all in a lump, makes the fingers itch and brings fantastic dreams of what might be.

She didn't mean it—as she was later to explain to the police. But there was a tantalizing quality in what had happened. Only yesterday she had been safe. Only a week ago she had returned from a holiday in Cornwall, where there had been little to do except lie on lemon-colored sands in a lemon-colored bathing suit, or feel the contrast between sun on baking shoulders and salt water foaming and slipping past her body, in the cold invigoration of the sea. The future would take care of itself.

And more. There was a pleasant-looking man, just on the right side of middle age, who came to do sketches at the beach. They were such intolerably bad sketches that Iris was relieved to discover he was a doctor from London.

By coincidence a breeze blew one of the sketches past her, and she retrieved it. So they fell into conversation. By coincidence it developed that the man's name was Charles Woodhall and that he was Francis Seton's doctor. It astounded Iris, who saw in this a good omen of summer magic. She liked Dr. Woodhall. He was as good a talker as Seton himself, without Seton's untiring bounce. And he knew when to be comfortably silent.

Dr. Woodhall would sit on a campstool, attired in ancient flannels, tennis shoes, and shirt, and draw endless sketches of Iris. A cigarette would hang from the corner of his mouth. He would blink as smoke got into one eye, and amusement wrinkles deepened from the corners

of his eyes almost back to temples that were slightly gray. Meantime, he talked. He talked happily of all things in earth and sky and sea. He also offered a profound apology for the bad sketches. But Iris, though she secretly agreed with him, kept them all, and so passed the fortnight.

They would meet again in London.

And she had a good job to go back to there.

All the future looked pleasant—until Francis Seton exploded everything that morning.

The thunderstorm, which had been imminent all day, broke late in the afternoon.

It brought little relief to Iris. She and Harold Mills went on with their work and were still working long after dinner, in the library under the shaded lamps and the rows of books behind their wire cages. It was a rich room, deep-carpeted like every other room in the house; but it was tainted with damp. Iris's head ached. She had sent off two dozen letters and arranged every detail of Seton's trip; all he had to do now was pack his bag. Seton himself was in the study, with the door closed between, cleaning out the litter in his desk.

Harold Mills put down his pen. "Iris," he said softly.

"Yes?"

Mills glanced towards the closed door of the study and spoke still more softly. "I want to ask you something."

"Of course."

She was surprised at his tone. He was sitting at his own writing table some distance away from her, with a tablelamp burning at his left. The light of the lamp shone on his flat hair, brushed with great precision round his head, on his waxy-colored face, and on his pince-nez. Since he was very young, it was only this pince-nez which gave him the sedate and donnish appearance; this or the occasional slight fidgeting of his hands. He almost blurted out the next words. "What I mean is: are you all right? Financially, I mean?"

"Oh yes."

She didn't know. She was not even thinking of this now. Dr. Woodhall had promised to drop in that evening to see Seton. It was nearly eleven now. Seton, who always swore that his immense vitality was due to the regularity of his habits, was as regular as that clock over the mantelpiece. At eleven o'clock he would smoke the last of the ten cigarettes allowed him a day, drink his one whisky and soda, and be in bed by eleven thirty sharp. If Dr. Woodhall didn't hurry . . .

Iris's head ached still more. Mills kept on talking, but she did not hear him. She awoke to this with a start. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I didn't catch—?"

"I said," repeated the other somewhat jerkily, "that I'm sorry for more reasons than one that we're leaving."

"So am I, Harold."

"You don't understand. Mine is rather a specialized job. I'll not get another in a hurry." Color came up under his pince-nez. "No, no, that isn't what I mean. I'm not complaining. It's very decent of Seton to provide a month's salary. But I'd hoped that this job would be more or less permanent. If it turned out to be that, there was something I wanted to do."

"What was that?"

"I wanted to ask you to marry me," said Mills.

There was a silence.

She stared back at him. She had never thought of him as awkward or tongue-tied or anything like the man who now sat and cracked the joints of his knuckles as though he could not sit still. In fact, she had hardly ever thought of him at all. And his face showed that he knew it.

"Please don't say anything." He got to his feet. "I don't want you to feel you've got to say anything." He began to pace the room with little short steps. "I haven't been exactly—attentive."

"You never even . . ."

He gestured. "Yes, I know. I'm not like that. I can't be. I wish I could." He stopped his pacing. "This fellow Woodhall, now."

"What about Dr. Woodhall?"

He never got the opportunity to say. This was the point at which they heard, very distinctly, the noise from the next room.

When they tried to describe it afterwards, neither could be sure whether it was a yell or a groan or the beginning of the incoherent words. It might have been a combination of all three. Then there were several soft little thuds, like the sound of a butcher's cleaver across meat on the chopping block. Then silence, except for the distant whisper of the rain.

That was the story which Iris Lane began to tell at Dr. Fell's flat. Both Dr. Fell and Superintendent Hadley listened with the closest attention, though they had heard it several times before.

"We didn't know what had happened," said Iris, moving her shoulders. "We called out to Mr. Seton, but he didn't answer. We tried the door, but it wouldn't open."

"Was it locked?"

"No, it was warped. The damp from the rain had swollen and warped the wood. Harold tried to get it open, but it wouldn't work until he finally took a run and jumped at it.

"There was nobody in the study except Mr. Seton," she went on. "I

know because I was afraid we should see someone. The place was brilliantly lighted. There's a big bronze chandelier, with electric candles, hanging over the flat-topped desk in the middle. And there was even a light burning in the cloakroom—it's hardly more than a cupboard for a wash basin, really—which opens out of the study. You could see everything at a glance. And there wasn't anybody hiding in the room."

She paused, visualizing the scene.

Francis Seton lay on the far side of the desk, between the desk and the windows. He was unconscious, with blood coming out of his nostrils.

His cigarette, put down on the edge of the desk, was now scorching the mahogany with an acrid smell. The desk chair and a little table had been overturned. There was a stain on the thick grey carpet where his glass had been upset, together with a stoppered decanter, which had not spilt, and a siphon enclosed in metal crossbands. Seton was moaning. When they turned him over on his side, they found the weapon.

"It was that hollow wooden thing with lead inside," said Iris. She saw it as vividly as though it lay on the carpet now. "Only six or seven inches long, but it weighed nearly a pound. Harold, who'd started to study medicine once, put his fingers down and felt round the back of Mr. Seton's head. Then he said I'd better hurry and phone for a proper doctor.

"I had backed away against the windows—I remember that. The curtains weren't quite drawn. I could hear the rain hitting the window behind me. I looked round because I was afraid there might be somebody hiding in the curtains. We pulled the curtains back on both windows. Then we saw the edge of the ladder. It had been propped up against the right-hand window, from the garden below. And I noticed something else that I'll swear to and swear to and go on swearing to until you believe me. But never mind what it was, for a minute.

"I ran out to phone for Dr. Woodhall, but it wasn't necessary. I met him coming up the stairs in the front hall."

There were several things she did not tell here.

She did not say how heartening it was to see Dr. Woodhall's shrewd, humorous face looking at her from under the brim of a sodden hat. He wore a dripping mackintosh with the collar turned up and carried his medicine case.

"I don't know how he got in," Iris went on. "Mr. Seton had dismissed the servants after dinner. The front door must have been unlocked. Anyway, he said, 'Hullo; is anything wrong?' I think I said, 'Come up quickly; something terrible has happened.' He didn't make

any comment. But when he had examined Mr. Seton, he said it was concussion of the brain all right, from several powerful blows. I asked whether I should phone for an ambulance. He said Mr. Seton wasn't in shape to be moved and that we should have to get him to bed in the house.

"When we were carrying him into his bedroom, things started to fall out of his pockets. The key to the safe wasn't there: it had been torn loose from the other end of his watch-chain. And he kept on moaning.

"You know the rest. The safe had been robbed, not only of the money but of two valuable folios. Apparently it was all plain sailing. There was the ladder propped against the windowsill outside. There were scuffed footprints in a flowerbed below. It was a burglar. It must have been a burglar. Only—" She paused, clearing her throat. "Only," she went on, *"both those windows were locked on the inside."*

Dr. Fell grunted. Something in this recital had interested him very much. He drew in several of his chins, and exchanged a glance with Superintendent Hadley. "Both the windows," he rumbled, "were locked on the inside. You're quite sure of that? Hey?"

"I'm absolutely positive."

"You couldn't have been mistaken?"

"I only wish I could have," said Iris helplessly. "And you know what they think, don't you? They think Harold and I caught him and beat his head in.

"It's so awfully easy to think that. Harold and I were alone in the house. We were sitting outside the only door to the study. There was no intruder anywhere. Both the study windows were locked on the inside. It—well, it just couldn't have been anybody else but us. Only it wasn't. That's all I can tell you."

Dr. Fell opened his eyes. "But, my dear young lady," he protested, blowing sparks from his cigar like the Spirit of the Volcano, "whatever else they think about you, I presume they don't think you are raving mad? Suppose you had faked this burglary? Suppose you had planted the ladder against the window? Would you and Mills then go about swearing the windows were locked in order to prove that your story couldn't be true?"

"Just a moment," said Superintendent Hadley sharply.

Hadley was beaten, and he knew it. But he was fair.

"I'll be frank with you, Miss Lane," he went on. "Before you came in, I was telling Dr. Fell that Mr. Seton is conscious. He's talked to me. And—"

"And?"

"Mr. Seton," said Hadley, "confirms your story in every detail. He clears you and Mills of any complicity in the crime."

Iris said nothing. All the same, they saw her face grow white under its tan. "He says," pursued Hadley, in the midst of a vast silence, "that he was sitting at his desk, facing the door to the library. He swears he could hear you and Mills talking in the library. His back, of course, was towards the windows. He agrees that the windows were locked, since he had just locked them himself. At a few minutes past eleven, he heard a footstep behind him. A 'shuffling' footstep. Just as he started to get up, something smashed him across the head, and that's all he remembers. So it seems you were telling the truth."

"H'mf," said Dr. Fell.

Iris stared at Hadley. "Then I'm not—you're not going to arrest me?"

"Frankly," snapped the superintendent, "no. I'm sorry to say I don't see how we can arrest anybody. The windows were locked. The door was watched. There was nobody hidden in the room. Yet someone, by the victim's own testimony, did get in and cosh Seton. We've got a blooming miracle, that's what we've got, and if you don't believe me, come along and talk to Seton for yourself."

Francis Seton lived, and nearly died, in the grand manner. His bedroom was furnished in the heavy, dark, and florid style of the Second French Empire, with a four-poster bed. He lay propped up with his neck above the pillows, glowering out of a helmet of bandages.

"Time's nearly up," warned Dr. Charles Woodhall, who stood at one side of the bed. His fingers were on Seton's wrist, but Seton snatched the wrist away.

Superintendent Hadley was patient. "What I'm trying to get at, Mr. Seton, is this. When did you lock those two windows?"

"Told you that already," said Seton. "About ten minutes before that fellow sneaked up and hit me."

"But you didn't catch a glimpse of the person who hit you?"

"No, worse luck. Or I'd have—"

"Yes. But *why* did you lock the windows?"

"Because I'd noticed the ladder outside. Couldn't have burglars getting in, could I?"

"You didn't try to find out who put the ladder there?"

"No. I couldn't be bothered."

"At the same time, you were a little nervous?"

For some time Iris Lane had the impression that Seton, if it were not for his injury, would have rolled over on his side, buried his face in the pillows, and groaned with impatience. But the last question stung him to wrath.

"Who says I was nervous? Nervous! I'm the last man in the world to be nervous. I haven't got a nerve in my body." He appealed to Dr. Woodhall and to Harold Mills. "Have I?"



"You've got an exceptionally strong constitution," replied Dr. Woodhall blandly.

Seton appeared to scent evasion here. His bloodshot eyes rolled, without a turn of his neck, from Woodhall to Mills, but they came back to Hadley. "Well? Anything else you want to know?"

"Just one more question, Mr. Seton. Are you sure there was nobody hidden in the study or the cloakroom before you were attacked?"

"Dead certain."

Hadley shut up his notebook. "Then that's all, sir. Nobody hidden, before or after. Windows locked, before and after. I don't believe in ghosts, and so the thing's impossible." He spoke quietly. "Excuse me, Mr. Seton, but are you sure you were attacked after all?"

"And excuse *me*," interrupted a new voice, thunderous but apologetic.

Dr. Fell, whose presence was somewhat less conspicuous than a captive balloon, had not removed his disreputable slouch hat, a breach of good manners which ordinarily he would have deplored. But his manner had a vast eagerness, like Old King Cole in a hurry. Iris Lane could not remember having seen him for some minutes. He lumbered in at the doorway with one hand holding an object wrapped in newspaper and the other supporting himself on his crutch-handled stick.

"Sir," he intoned, addressing Seton, "I should regret it very much if my friend Hadley gave you an apoplectic stroke. It is therefore only fair to tell you that you were attacked, and very thoroughly battered about the head, by one of the persons in this room. I am also glad the police have kept your study locked up since then."

There was a silence as sudden as that which follows a loud noise.

From the newspaper Dr. Fell took out a soda-water siphon and put it down with a thump on the center table. It was a large siphon bound round with metal bands in a diamond design. And Dr. Fell reared up. "Dash it, Hadley," he complained, "why couldn't you have told me about the siphon? Ten days in a spiritual abyss and all because you couldn't tell me about the siphon! It took the young lady to do that."

"But I did tell you about a siphon," said Hadley. "I've told you about it a dozen times!"

"No, no, no," insisted Dr. Fell dismally. "You said 'a' siphon. Presumably an ordinary siphon, the unending white bulwark of the English pub. You didn't say it was this particular kind of siphon."

"But what the devil has the siphon got to do with it anyway?" demanded Hadley. "Mr. Seton wasn't knocked out with a siphon."

"Oh yes, he was," said Dr. Fell.

It was so quiet that they could hear a fly buzzing against one half-open window.

"You see," continued Dr. Fell, fiery with earnestness, "the ordinary siphon is of plain glass. It doesn't have these criss-cross metal bands, or that nickeled cap at the other side of the nozzle. In short, this is a 'fountain-fill' siphon, the sort which you fill yourself with plain water and turn into soda water by means of compressed-air capsules."

Enlightenment came to Superintendent Hadley.

"Ah!" chortled Dr. Fell. "Got it, have you? The police, as a matter of ordinary routine, would closely examine the dregs of a whisky glass or any decanter found at the scene of a crime. But they would never think twice about a siphon because the ordinary soda-water siphon can't possibly be tampered with. And yet, by thunder, this one could be tampered with!"

Dr. Fell sniffed. He lumbered over to the bedside table and picked up a tumbler. Returning with it to the center table, he squirted some of the soda into the glass. He touched his tongue to it.

"I think, Mr. Harold Mills," he said, "you had better give yourself up for theft and attempted murder."

Dr. Fell chuckled as he sat again in his own library at Chelsea.

"And you still don't see it?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Dr. Woodhall.

"No," cried Iris Lane.

"The whole trick," their host went on, "turns on the fact that the 'Mickey Finn' variety of knockout drops produces on the victim exactly the same sensation as being struck over the head: the sudden bursting explosion of pain, the roaring in the ears, and almost instant unconsciousness.

"Mills had a dozen opportunities that day to load the fountain-fill siphon with the drug. He knew, as you all knew, exactly when Francis Seton would drink his one whisky and soda of the day. Mills had already removed what he wanted from the safe. Finally, he had propped up a ladder outside the study window to make the crime seem the work of a burglar. All he had to do then was to wait for eleven o'clock.

"At eleven o'clock Seton drank the hocussed mixture, cried out, and fell, knocking over a number of objects on the carpet. Since the whole effect of this drug depends on a violent cerebral rush of blood, a man already suffering from high blood pressure would be likely and even certain to bleed from the nostrils. It provided the last realistic touch."

Dr. Fell growled to himself, no longer seeming quite so cherubic. Then he looked at Iris.

"Mills," he went on, "deliberately fiddled with the door, pretending it was stuck, which it was not. He wanted to allow time for the imaginary burglar to loot the safe. Then he ran in with you. When he turned Seton over, he took that piece of lead-filled broomhandle out

of his sleeve, slipped it under the body, and dramatically called your attention to it.

"Next, you remember, he felt at the base of Seton's skull in pretended horror and told you to go out and phone for a doctor. As a result of this, you also recall, he was for several minutes completely alone in the study."

Iris was looking at the past, examining each move she herself had made. "You mean," she muttered, "that was when he—?" She brought up her arm in the gesture of one using a life preserver.

"Yes," said Dr. Fell. "That was when he deliberately struck several blows on the head of an unconscious man to complete his plan."

"He removed the key to the safe from Seton's watch-chain. In case the police should be suspicious of any drinks found at the scene of a crime, he rinsed out the spilled whisky glass in that convenient cloak-room and poured into the glass a few drops of harmless whisky from the decanter. He had no time to refill and recharge the siphon before you and Dr. Woodhall returned to the study, so he left it alone. A handkerchief round his hand prevented any fingerprints. Unfortunately, mischance tripped him up with a resounding wallop."

Dr. Woodhall nodded. "You mean," he said, "that Seton noticed the ladder and locked the windows."

"Yes. And the unfortunate Mr. Mills never discovered the locked windows until it was too late. Miss Lane, as you have probably discovered, is a very positive young lady. She looked at the windows. She knew they were locked. She was prepared to swear it in any court. So Mills, floundering and drifting and never very determined except where it came to appropriating someone else's property, had to keep quiet. He could not even get at that betraying siphon afterwards because the police kept the room locked up."

"He had one bit of luck, though. Francis Seton, of course, never heard any footsteps behind him just before the attack. Anybody who takes one look at the thick carpet of the study cannot fail to be convinced of that. I wondered whether the good Mr. Seton might be deliberately lying. But a little talk with Seton will show you the real reason. The man's boasted vitality is killing him: it has got him into such a state of nerves that he really does need a year in California. Once he saw that ladder outside the window, once he began to think of burglars, he was ready to imagine anything."

Iris was glancing sideways at Dr. Woodhall. Woodhall, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, was glancing sideways at her.

"I—er—I don't like to bring it up," said Iris. "But—"

"Mills' proposal?" inquired Dr. Fell affably.

"Well, yes."

"My dear young lady," intoned Dr. Fell with all the gallantry of a

load of bricks falling through a skylight, "there you mention the one point at which Mills really showed good taste. Discernment. *Raffinement*. It also probably occurred to him that a criminal who proposes marriage places the lady in a blind-eyed and sympathetic mood if the criminal should happen to make a slip in his game afterwards. But can you honestly say you are sorry it was Mills they took away in the Black Maria?"

Iris and Dr. Woodhall were not even listening.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":**

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Mark Trent, the ambassador to China, and his wife Dorothy were the intended victims.

COUNTRY	AMBASSADOR	WIFE	COSTUMES
Austria	Larry O'Hara	Genevieve	Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette
Bulgaria	Norman Perkins	Catherine	George and Martha Washington
China	Mark Trent	Dorothy	Samson and Delilah
Denmark	Harold Queen	Eleanor	Czar Nicholas and Alexandra
Estonia	Karl Raddock	Frieda	Queen Victoria and Prince Albert
France	Ivan Underwood	Alice	Romeo and Juliet
Germany	John Simpson	Belinda	Anthony and Cleopatra

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**J**. A. Jance's first series character, Seattle detective J. P. Beaumont, is back and in form in **Breach of Duty** (Avon, \$23). That's not to say that things aren't rocky for Beaumont. Former marriages, a bout with alcoholism, and other assorted personal and professional crises have taken their toll. Yet Beau is reacting positively to his new partner, Sue Danielson. A single mom and a tireless cop, Sue has earned Beaumont's respect, and the two have fallen into a team rhythm that's proving to be supportive for both of them. So it shouldn't be difficult for them to clear the case of an elderly woman who has died in her bed during a housefire. Nor should Sue, with her partner's help, have trouble dealing with her jerk of an ex-husband. Famous last words. Jance's characters are credible and sympathetic, and her handling of her (ultimately heartbreaking) story is surefooted. Jance's Beaumont deserves all his old fans, and this novel will undoubtedly earn him more.

Marne Davis Kellogg's heroine, Lilly Bennett, may no longer be young, but there's no limit to her energy. She's not only a rancher from a wealthy Wyoming family, she's also a P.I. and U.S. marshal—she's as comfortable in a Versace gown as she is in dungarees. Here's a lively woman with a healthy sex drive, a quick wit, and little tolerance for fools. In **Tramp** (Bantam, \$5.99), she's been lassoed into sitting on the board of the local, but nationally known, repertory theater company. Generally that would mean little more than generously contributing to the theater's financial support. When the company's founder and main benefactor is poisoned, however, Lilly's interest becomes professional. If you're looking for a fresh character with a no-holds-barred attitude, try one of Kellogg's mysteries.

John Philpin and Patricia Sierra's second book, **Tunnel of Night** (Bantam, \$6.50), not only features the return of forensic psychiatrist Lucas Frank and his cop daughter, it also brings back their nemesis,

serial killer John Wolf. Wolf was a brilliant psychopath whom Lucas thought he had killed at the conclusion of the first book of this series. In fact, after that ordeal Lucas basically retired and now lives in near seclusion at a lakeside cabin. Surprise! Wolf returns, and this time he's out for the blood of the very people who ruined his fun last time around. In a crowded genre Philpin and Sierra have created protagonists sympathetic enough to pull readers through the inevitable carnage and leave them rooting for this father-daughter team.

Readers who enjoy private eye tales with a first-person point of view should take note of a relative newcomer who's making a deservedly big splash in the pond. G. M. Ford's fourth Leo Waterman novel, **Last Ditch** (Avon, \$22), is as fine a place as any to meet Leo, his M.E. girlfriend, and his very iconoclastic group of "operatives." The prodigal son of a prosperous political boss, Waterman is a Seattle native—and the author uses the city more as a character in the drama than as a mere backdrop. This book gives readers a look at old Seattle especially, as well as a chunk of Leo's family background. The plot centers around the discovery of the body of Leo's late father's archenemy—a political opponent who disappeared almost thirty years earlier. And it doesn't look at all good for the Waterman reputation that the skeletal remains were found buried in the back yard of the family manse. Leo Waterman, with his wry outlook on life, is smart, independent, and tough. He's also fiercely loyal, compassionate, and stubborn. All in all, this is the guy I'd hire if I needed a P.I. (and he makes good company even if you're only interested in tagging along for the ride).

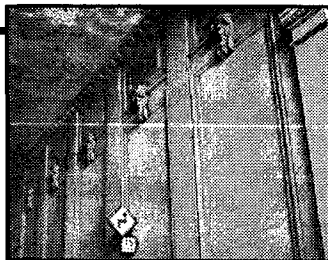
K. W. Jeter has, among other feats, continued the story of Philip K. Dick's "Blade Runner" character. Now Jeter has written **Noir** (Bantam, \$23), a Chanderlesque private eye tale set in the future. Believe me, Jeter's vision of the future is as dark as any that the original *noir* creators devised. The picture of life for many humans is grim. The reality beneath the surface, however, is downright terrifying. Retired ex-cop McNihil isn't a stranger to any of this. He knows firsthand that bad things happen to good people, and he knows how bad things can turn good people bad as well. So when the all-powerful corporation hires him to find out how one of its junior executives was murdered, he knows he's being set up. He also knows that he has little choice but to play the hand through. There have always been crossover novels—mysteries with s.f. settings and characters, and vice versa. If you've enjoyed them, you'll be mesmerized by this big, mindblowing peek at the life of a seedy private eye several tomorrows from today.

Alaska is the setting for Sue Henry's award-winning series starring musher and dog breeder Jessie Arnold. **Deadfall** (Avon, \$22) takes readers to a small island in Kachemak Bay for part of the tale—but I'm getting ahead of myself. First there is an escalating series of inci-

(continued on page 142)

# THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by James Hagerty of Melbourn, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Donald E. Sines of Rio Rancho, New Mexico; Harlow Soderborg Clark of Pleasant Grove, Utah; Julie A. Beach of Columbus, Ohio; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Christopher Murray



of Oglethorpe, Georgia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Amy Cryer of Gaithersburg, Maryland; Deborah E. Lashley of Kingsport, Tennessee; Connie Coleman of Trimble, Tennessee; and Deena Dean of Ft. Pierce, Florida.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## MS. NOMER by James Hagerty

"It's not phallic, and it's not yonic," said Kapshaw, scrolling down a list on his video display terminal. "The Committee of Fifteen's official List of Dingbats and Curlicues doesn't show that sign under Talismans. I bet it's half a swastika."

"I'm telling you," replied Bonns, "it was posted by those people who still read and write, the ones who joined up in 2025 with that Nomer woman. They made that sign. Check under Travel."

"Why does she make signs, anyway?" It's seditious. The Committee of Fifteen is in charge of making signs to replace all that written stuff."

"Why do they do half the things they do . . . read books, write a bunch of stuff, let a woman lead them?"

"You're right. It's under Travel," said Kapshaw, activating the audio switch and increasing the volume.

"VEDIC SYMBOL FOR MEANDERING RIVER, IT NOW MEANS A CROOKED LINE OR MISTAKES WERE MADE."

"Where was it posted?" Kapshaw asked.

"On the front of the Great Hall of the Committee of Fifteen, above a 15 mph sign."

"That street isn't a crooked street!" exclaimed Kapshaw. "It runs straight to the Digital Technical Center that replaced the library. That Nomer woman has to be stopped! And, Bonns, don't forget to burn all those books at the Digital Technical Center that Nomer and her people distributed there a week ago. Now we have to find out what 15 mph means."

"How about fifteen moronic pinheads?" Bonn replied.



(continued from page 140)

dents aimed at terrorizing Jessie. She agrees to hide out at a deserted campsite with only her lead dog as company in order to stay out of harm's way and give her cop boyfriend a clearer route in his search for the stalker. With Jessie safe, Alex has more energy to investigate people who might want to harm her—including folks who hold a grudge against her boyfriend. Both gird their loins to fight an unseen enemy as Alex narrows his search, until Jessie finally must do battle against a very visible foe. Henry has stuffed this one full of action and adventure—some real thrills set against the wild beauty of Alaska.

Inspector Richard Jury and the old gang are in tiptop form in Martha Grimes's **The Stargazey** (Henry Holt, \$25). One evening Jury watches a beautiful woman in a fur coat board his double-decker bus, get off and walk for a bit, then reboard the bus. When she again steps off, he follows her to the gates of a cloistered garden, where he halts and reluctantly retraces his steps. According to the papers the next morning, however, the woman turns up murdered in the herb patch. But is this the same woman? Jury's old pal Melrose goes to London, hangs about in an art gallery, wines and dines Bea Slocum, and even stays at his father's old club, all in an effort to help Jury solve this one. If you've never made the acquaintance of Jury, Plant, Wiggins and Carole-Anne, not to mention the band of eccentrics back in Long Piddleton, this is the ideal time to do so.

Graham Thomas brings back Scotland Yard Chief Superintendent Erskine Powell in his second outing in **Malice in Cornwall** (Ivy, \$5.99). Powell is called to the charming coastal town of Penrick to investigate eerie reports of a glowing corpse that rides in with the surf at night and then disappears. He isn't sanguine that there's any call for his services, but the idea of a bit of a paid seaside holiday entices him. Soon, however, he begins to understand the edginess apparent in the natives: the spooky sightings are reminding folks of the thirty-year-old unsolved murder of a beautiful local girl. Thomas develops his mystery the good old fashioned way by paying attention to local characters and color and to the puzzle of his plot. This series should delight readers who have always loved the mysteries of June Thompson, Dorothy Simpson, and Catherine Aird.

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- ZONE 5- Upper Legs

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**Scientific solution.** Anatomic Concepts, a medical products research and manufacturing company, has designed the ultimate mattress pad. Using research originally conducted for hospitals, this innovative company developed an effective, affordable way to transform any mattress into a specially-designed sleep surface that closely matches the shape of the human body. It features a patented five-zone sleep surface that holds the body in a neutral posture and redistributes pressure during sleep.

**Comfort zones.** The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure. Until now, only the most expensive and most advanced mattress products featured this degree of technology, but now you can get it without even buying a new mattress.

The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure.

**Installs in seconds.** NatureSleep Platinum fits right over your existing mattress, uses normal sheets and turns any bed into an anatomically-correct and incredibly comfortable sleep surface. The five comfort zones have been created using a computer-designed grid pattern and are engineered to accommodate people of all heights and sizes.

**Risk-free.** Try it for yourself, it comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If for any reason you are not completely satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

## NatureSleep™ Platinum:

<b>Twin</b> .....	<b>\$59.95</b>	\$8 S&H
<b>Double</b> .....	<b>\$89.95</b>	\$10 S&H
<b>Queen</b> .....	<b>\$99.95</b>	\$12 S&H
<b>King</b> .....	<b>\$119.95</b>	\$14 S&H

Please mention promotional code 3494-14709.

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

**800-992-2966**

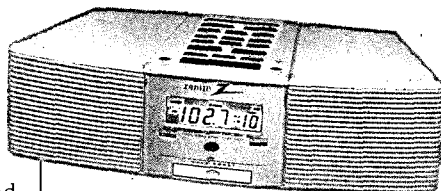


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# Big sound from a stereo radio—without the big price!

Zenith Audio, a leading electronics manufacturer designs a "Small Footprint," "Big Sound" stereo system and drives the price below \$100.



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- 37 Preset Station Memories
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- "Fail-safe" Alarm System

**Z**enith Audio has developed a Digital Stereo Clock Radio that boasts the acoustic quality and practical features of stereo radios four times as expensive. You'll be amazed at the sound quality and powerful bass you get from a radio this small and this affordable. This stereo radio features an 11-key handheld remote control and an input jack for CD players or other audio sources.

**Loaded with features.** The AM/FM radio features digital tuning for pinpoint reception and crystal-clear sound. The STEREO indicator allows you to tune in to the stereo signal. It also picks up TV and WEATHER signals with 13 TV channels and 7 Weather channels, so your Zenith Audio Clock Radio is a great source of news, entertainment and information. You can program the unit's memory for 37 preset stations, and the tuning buttons can operate either manually or in a automatic search mode.

**Practical functions.** The backlit clock has several alarm functions, so you can wake to either radio, TV, weather or a buzzer. The sleep timer allows you to fall asleep to up to 90 minutes of music, TV or weather and then shuts off automatically. In the morning, if you need a few extra minutes of sleep, press the SNOOZE bar on the control panel or on the remote. The radio or alarm tone stops for 10 minutes and then sounds

again. The unit's battery backup system will maintain the time, alarm and preset station memories in the event of a temporary power interruption.

**Factory direct risk-free offer.** You can spend hundreds of dollars more on a stereo radio, but why do it? We get the Stereo Clock Radio direct from Zenith and pass the savings on to you. This product comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclu-

sive risk-free home trial. If you are not satisfied for any reason, simply return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

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